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Rodney Elrod

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SALVATION

by

Rodney Elrod

B.A., Northeast Louisiana University, 1979

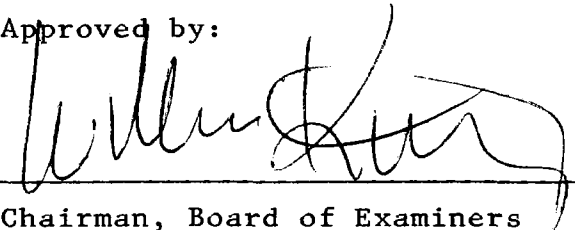
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Dean, Graduate School

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S A L V A T I O N

a novel by

RODNEY ELROD

Before I formed thee in the belly  
I knew thee; and before thou camest  
forth out of the womb I sanctified thee,  
and I ordained thee a prophet unto the  
world.

JEREMIAH, chapter 1, verse 5

Salvation. Oh that lovely word. Salvation. That perfect bliss as comforting as a mother's sweet kiss. Salvation. The promise of a better world to come. Salvation. No more suffering, no more tears, no fighting for what can't be won. Salvation. We all want it, don't we? We all need it, don't we? Don't we, all of us, need salvation? I know about salvation and I know this: without Amos Virgil there would be no salvation. Without Amos Virgil there would be nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, no way to escape the terrible wrath of our creator whose promised vengeance is even now let loose on this world that rejects his grace and knows him not, this very world, once a paradise freely given to us by God, but now nothing more than a swirling cesspool polluted by hate, greed, lust, and treachery. I know about salvation because Amos Virgil showed me the way, showed us all the way when he went down alone into the darkest jungle and there on the river sat fishing and fasting for sixty-one days until the Lord heard his cries of confession and visited him in the form of the largest catfish ever caught by mortal man and there commissioned him to return to us here in the swamps and from here to lead us, the last true believers, the last true disciples of God and his prophet, to salvation so that the entire world might see the power of God and repent and abide once again as brothers in the bosom of the Lord as the day of our destruction appears. He was who he was, he is who he is, he did what he did, and only I remain to say it was so.



Part I

T H E C A L L

SALVATION, LOUISIANA  
June, 1985

Chapter 1

Ramsey Tarber, the sheriff of Cocoudrie Parish was not a happy man. He dropped the telephone and stood up behind the desk which dominated his small office.

"Good God almighty that's just what I need," he said, then wheeled quickly and kicked the filing cabinet behind him. A duck mounted on the wall fell to the floor.

"You feeling all right, Sheriff?" Ned Peters, Ramsey's youngest deputy, stuck his head in the doorway.

"No, hell no, I ain't feeling all right. I'm so nervous I could shit a covey of quail." Ned stepped into the office and shut the door behind him.

"What's the matter, Sheriff?"

"What's the matter? When the hell did you die, Ned. Salvation is about to become part of the Gulf of Mexico for one thing and the governor of this waterlogged state is due to arrive here at noon today. And in case that isn't enough,

that was the FBI on the phone. They'll be here in an hour.<sup>2</sup>"

"What's the FBI coming here for?"

"Not now, Ned," Ramsey said. "I'm going to the Holy Ground and see Leon. I'll be back in half an hour." Ramsey picked the duck up and placed it back on the wall. "You be here," he said as he grabbed his hat and started down the hall toward the main office. Ned followed him.

"Sure," Ned said. "I'll be here. I just wanted to. . ."

"Not now, Ned! Not now!"

"But you. . ."

"Damnitt to hell, Ned. I said not now. Can't you understand plain English?" Ramsey stopped short of the back door. He took a deep breath and turned to face Ned. "I'm sorry for cursing at you, Ned, but I've got a lot on my mind. What is it you want?"

"Well," Ned said. "I wouldn't have bothered you but I thought. . ."

"Thought what, Ned. Spit it out."

"I was having breakfast at the Newlight Cafe this morning and I heard some men talking. They say that Amos Virgil is coming back to Salvation?"

"Who said?"

"It's all over town."

"Reckon what gave them that idea?" Ramsey said.

"Maybe the rain?" Ned said.

"Yeah, maybe the rain." Ramsey turned and started out the back door.

"Want me to do anything while your gone, Sheriff?" asked Ned.

Ramsey looked at Ned, then across the counter that ran the length of the main office. Behind the counter there was a pegboard covered with knives, razors, pistols, and shotguns that had been confiscated from drunken black men over in the juke joints across the slough. Hanging suspended over the weapons was a giant catfish. A flaking dull gray and nearly seven feet long, his mouth was big enough to swallow a beach ball. A brass plaque underneath read:

JONAS  
Caught by Leon Virgil  
June 1st, 1938 in the  
Amazon River. Weight  
238 pounds.

"Dust the damn fish, Ned. He might be swimming again real soon."

Ramsey slammed the door and started across the parking lot at a fast walk. Halfway to his truck he took off his hat and started scratching his head with the hook on his left arm. It was a habit he had, rubbing his head like that. When he replaced the hat, there were spots of blood on the stainless steel hook. He reached back with his good hand and gingerly fingered the scab. It was broken again. "Damn," he said and wiped the blood on his pants.

A drizzle began to fall from the gray sky that capped the horizon like a dome as Ramsey started out of town, heading east on highway four. Only nine in the morning, it seemed like dusk. He flipped on his wipers and tuned the radio

to an all-weather station. The voice was the same one he had been listening to for the past several weeks. Ramsey had grown to like the voice and the man behind it. He sounded like God when he talked about the weather.

More bad news for the flood-battered south. A massive low pressure has moved into the Gulf of Mexico and is expected to spread heavy rain over much of the Gulf coast. The National Weather Service is predicting 6-8 inches with local accumulations much heavier. This low pressure, coupled with a stationary high over the mid-west that is causing massive snowmelt, should continue the rise of the Mississippi and all tributaries. Officials from the Corps of Engineers predict a crest of 18.8 feet tomorrow in New Orleans, 8 feet above flood stage.

Ramsey turned the radio off with another curse. At the edge of town the bridge over the Atchafalaya River was blocked by a barricade and sign that read: CLOSED TO THROUGH TRAFFIC BRIDGE OUT FOUR MILES AHEAD, but Ramsey drove around the sign and stopped on top of the bridge. He got out and lit a cigarette. Standing there with an unobstructed view of the flood waters that stretched for miles, Ramsey forgave himself a little for having lost his temper and cursed at Ned. Being a Christian Sheriff was hard enough, but with the flood, the governor, and now the FBI, he probably had a right to curse.

Salvation lay behind him like a walled city, its homes schools, businesses, and four thousand residents surrounded by an earthen levee twenty feet thick that kept the ever-rising blanket of brown water at bay. Without the levee, the streets of Salvation would have been six feet under water.

He knew what a flood this size meant to Cocoudrie Parish. The farmers couldn't farm. They couldn't buy groceries, trucks, or equipment-fertilizer, feed or seed. Tax revenues would fall. Ramsey would have to lay off deputies-maybe Ned. No new uniforms for the little league. It was all almost too much for him.

He removed his hat and began to scratch his head as he stood there gazing toward the Mississippi some five miles to the east. Suddenly he was no longer the beleaguered, overweight sheriff of Cocoudrie Parish, but a lean young stud standing on the mound of Yankee Stadium with fifty thousand fans chanting his name. "Tarber! Tarber! Tarber!" they called.

A rookie, he had been called to the majors after his discharge from the Army and reported with a fastball that only God can give and a curve that fell off a table. He won four games in the September stretch, and in the '62 World Series against the Dodgers, he won two more. He returned home to Salvation, a hero wearing jeans that bulged with bonus money. He spent some of that money on a new riding mower for his parents and with a bellyfull of beer began to cut the grass. Ramsey scratched his head harder as he rode the mower down a deep ditch and up the other side. He felt the mower lean, then fall, then the chilling sound of tempered steel cutting through the flesh and bone of his left arm. Lying on his back with gas dripping in his face, Ramsey raised up and saw his arm in the ditch

beside him, blood spurting rhythmically from the elbow, the fingers contracting and relaxing as if squeezing an imaginary baseball. As always, he gasped, and jerked his hand down. He stared at the blood-smearred hook, wiped the blood on his pants, and began to silently cry.

The low rumble of thunder sent him running to his truck. Driving down the bridge, he looked in his rearview mirror and saw a wall of water advancing toward Salvation from the southwest. Trucks and cars were parked on the shoulder of the road, and men, women, and children stood waist-deep in water, fishing for crayfish with nets. Only the fence tops showed above the water. They waved as he drove by. He waved and drove on. There would be plenty of crayfish this year anyway.

Garvis Lee Temple stepped into the road. Naked except for cutoffs and a Yankee baseball cap worn backwards, he waved his hand motioning for Ramsey to stop.

"Morning, Lefty," he said. "Got any crayfish?"

"Not on me, no," Ramsey said.

"Here." Garvis swung one of the bulging burlap bags that lay at his feet into the back of Ramsey's truck. "I got me four sacks just this morning," he said. His teeth were chipped and stained by the wad of tobacco that never left his mouth.

"Say, Lefty, reason I stopped you. Have you seen Amos Virgil yet?"

Ramsey took off his hat and started scratching his head.

"What do you mean, yet?" he said.

"He's in town, ain't he?"

"Not that I know of. Where'd you hear that?"

"From the misses. Some of the colored Christians told her down at the church last night."

"But you haven't seen him?" asked Ramsey.

"Not with my own eyes, no," Garvis Lee said, "but you know how the misses loves that Amos and for the past few days she's been as skitish as a young colt. She told me a week ago that he was coming back."

"Well that's the first I've heard of it," Ramsey said. He pulled his hook down and looked at it.

"You ought to put a pad or something on that hook, Lefty, if you gonna rub your head like that. Hell, that's bound to hurt don't it?"

"Only when I think about it," Ramsey said. He put his hat back on. "I got to go. And don't go telling everybody that Amos is coming back. That ain't nothing but a rumor."

Ramsey started to drive away, then stopped and leaned out the window.

"You best get a move on, Garvis Lee. It's raining hard in town and coming this way," he said.

"Let it come, Lefty. I was born wet."

Further on, two inches of water covered the road, and Ramsey slowed his truck to a crawl. Deserted farm houses sat back off the road on either side, water over the windows.



Up ahead Donald Gene Crump and his entire family were piling more sandbags on the makeshift levee that surrounded his home. But even the six foot barrier couldn't stop the seepage, and they worked in water a foot deep. Beyond the house, only the exhaust pipe that protruded from the water marked the location of Donald Gene's tractor. Donald Gene was the only farmer who remained with his home in this part of the parish, and as Ramsey drove by, he looked up and waved, but the look of hopelessness across his broad, weathered face said that soon, he too would surrender all he owned to the flood waters.

At the washed-out bridge over Beouf Bayou Ramsey turned north onto a dim, dirt road. The land was not cleared here, but heavily forested on either side. The road was soft and the gumbo mud sucked at his tires. Ramsey got out and put his truck in four-wheel drive. This was Leon Virgil's property, the Holy Ground, five thousand acres of the last hardwood swamp left in America. It had belonged to a Virgil since the Civil War and had never been cleared, drained, or farmed.

Ramsey knew these woods well. After his accident he had lived on Virgil Island with Daddy Leon for five years hunting and fishing every day. He had seen snakes as big as his arms, alligators as big as his boat, and cypress trees big enough to drive a truck through. The state had been trying to acquire the land for years to use as a wildlife refuge, but Leon refused to sell. He said the land,

by rights, belonged to Amos and only Amos could sell.

The road was now just a bed of mud, once Ramsey had to winch out of a deep rut. Much more rain, he thought, and nobody will be using this road. As he rounded the final bend and caught sight of the Virgil house, a light rain began to fall. Nestled in a grove of pecan trees, the house was made of weathered cypress boards with a tin roof and a porch on three sides. It sat on stilts three feet high in front and nearly ten feet in back where the bluff rolled to meet the bayou below.

Ramsey parked in the front yard. There was no activity in the house, but two bluetick puppies ran out from under the porch and escorted him around back where Leon, sitting on a campstool, was skinning catfish on a broad, smooth stump.

Over eighty, Leon was still a handsome man with a high forehead made more prominent by the long, thin white hair that he combed straight back. A lifetime of working as a surveyor had left him wiry and nimble. His pale blue eyes were still clear.

"How do, Ramsey," Leon said. "Where's the Governor?"

"Won't be here till noon."

"You gonna bring him out here?"

"Maybe. If he's got time." Ramsey looked at the catfish on the stump. "Been fishing?" he asked.

"Fishing? Hell. What man in his right mind would go fishing for midget catfish. And that's for damn sure all

we've got anymore. Midget catfish. There's PCB, DDT, LSD, TNT, and God only knows what else in the river, but not a single big fish," Leon made a final incision on the catfish he was working on, then stuck the knife in the stump. He dried his hands and pulled a joint from his shirt pocket. He grinned at Ramsey. "I was just out checking the water. It came up another three inches. If this keeps up, Daniel Delecroix won't have to worry about next year's election. A drowned man can't run for office. Want a toke?"

Ramsey shook his head.

"You wouldn't arrest me if I had one, would you?"

"Hadn't yet, have I?"

"Nope." Leon lit the joint and slowly filled his lungs. "Yes sir," he said when he let the smoke out. "The Mighty Mississippi's flexing like a young stud. Another week or two of rain like we've had and that dam won't be nothing but so much concrete in the bottom of the Gulf."

"You act like you want it to go," Ramsey said.

"Let's just say I don't give a rat's ass if it does."

"Well, you can forget that. I talked to Edison yesterday and he said there's no danger at all of that dam giving way. He said it could stand twice the pressure it's got now."

"Ramsey, you've lived in Cocoudrie Parish all your life. You ought to know the damn Corp of Engineers don't know squat about what that river's gonna do. Not squat."

"Edison built the damn thing. He. . ."

"He don't know shit."

"Let's hope he does. We'll all be ruined if he don't."

"Ruined, you say? How about saved. They've turned the whole damn river into a concrete sewage ditch from here to Minnesota, and the river don't like it one bit, not one damn bit. And neither do I. Swampland is supposed to flood. That's why they call it swampland. It's as natural as the sunrise, nature's way of cleaning things out. Just like a giant enema, and this swamp here is needing an enema bad. It's nothing but a goddamn free sewer for those chemical bastards." The joint was out and Leon stuck it in his shirt pocket. "Come here," he said. "Got something to show you." He started down the hill toward the dock.

Ramsey lit a cigarette and said: "What is it?"

"A snake."

"What kind of snake?"

"A cottonmouth."

"I've seen a million cottonmouths," Ramsey said.

"You've never seen one like this."

"I've seen them every way there is to see them."

Leon bent to the rope hanging over the dock and turned his blue eyes on Ramsey.

"You ever see a Siamese cottonmouth?"

"Nope," Ramsey said and flipped his cigarette into the water. "Never have."

"Then take a look at this bastard." Leon lifted a wire fish cage onto the dock. The snake-short, thick, and black-

lay curled in the basket, its two heads, each on a separate six inch neck, thrown back in striking position.

"My God," Ramsey said and stepped closer. The snakes struck in quick succession like combination punches from a middleweight. Ramsey jumped back. "Good God," he said.

"Mean bastard ain't he?" said Leon, laughing. "Or mean bastards, I should say. "Caught it this morning. It looked like a goddamn submarine coming at me."

"Put him back," Ramsey said. "He stinks." Ramsey turned and started up the hill.

"Don't he smell something awful," Leon said, following close behind. "Siamese snakes. I told you this swamp needed an enema didn't I? Didn't I tell you?"

"Yeah, you told me, Leon." Ramsey shoved the catfish to one side and sat down on the stump. "Sit down. I want to talk to you."

Leon pulled a small whetrock from his pocket and began to sharpen the pocketknife. "Shoot," he said.

"Haven't heard from Amos lately have you?"

"You feeling all right?" Leon asked.

"Of course I am," Ramsey said.

"Then what the hell kind of fool question is that? I haven't seen or heard from Amos in over fifteen years. Nobody has. You know that."

"I just thought you might've heard something?"

"What give you that idea?"

"Talk in town is that he's coming back."

"Well that's a lie. Edith would know it if he was."

"How's she doing?"

"Still the same. Two months since she left her bedroom. She don't seem to be in pain, but. . .what the hell's on your mind anyhow, Ramsey?"

Ramsey removed his hat and scratched his head, then said: "Leon, I'll just tell it to you straight. I got a call from the FBI office in Baton Rouge today. There'll be two agents here in less than an hour with a warrant for Amos' arrest."

"On what charge?"

"Murder."

"Murder?"

"Two counts."

"They got proof?"

"Proof enough I guess. They got a warrant."

"Murder?" Leon said. He pulled the joint from his pocket, but the steady drizzle prevented him from lighting it. He crumpled it up and flung it to the ground. "Damn my worn out stomach, I could sure take a drink right now-Murder?"

"Yep. They said he killed two Mexicans with a knife in New York City, a man and a woman. Cut their throats. The man was the son of the Mexican Ambassador to the United Nations. There's a lot of pressure on them to catch up with Amos. They think he'll show up here. Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Think he'll come back to Salvation?"

"How would I know what Amos is gonna do?" Leon said.

"How would I know?"

"I sure wish he would come back," Ramsey said.

"Why, so you can arrest him?"

"Hell, why do you think? So he can make it stop raining."

"You're forgetting something, Ramsey," Leon said.

"What's that?"

"Amos likes the rain."

\* \* \*

"You men come in out of the rain and get some coffee. You'll catch your death of cold out there." Edith Virgil stood on the porch holding a serving tray in her hands. Her shining silver hair was tied neatly in a bun, her face gleaming red like a ripe plum.

"Well I'll be dipped in shit," Leon said.

AMOS ON THE RIVER  
March, 1985

Chapter 2

You don't know me, Catfish. You don't know who I am or what I'm doing here, don't know why you've got that rope wrapped around your tail, why you're tied to this tree, why you can't get away, why you've got to die. Don't be confused, Catfish. Before we die together I'll tell you everything because you've got a right to know who it is that's got you and why you've got to die.

My name is Amos Virgil. I'm a white man from Salvation, Louisiana and for seventeen of my thirty-three years I've been running from God's call. Five universities, four continents, three wives, two prisons, one asylum, and now I've come to this exact spot to be with you. I'm glad to be here. If I never do anything else, and I don't plan to, I've done this. I've come down here to this damn jungle and I've got you caught and tied and you're the biggest one ever, bigger



than Huck Finn's six-footer, bigger than Teddy Roosevelt's seven-footer, bigger even than Daddy Leon's, Jonas. This is where it all ends, Catfish. You will be my Salvation.

I'm here because my grandfather was here. His name was Leon Virgil. We always called him Daddy Leon. More than likely he's dead now. He was here looking for oil in 1938. They didn't find any, but they found your daddy. It's all in this field book that Daddy Leon gave me when I was a kid, but I don't need to read it. I know it by heart. He wrote it with a #3 pencil. It's printed with all the neatness and clarity of a lifetime surveyor. It reads:

Texaco Survey Crew #25  
Leon Virgil Crew Chief  
May 30, 1938

Continued said line south 2700 feet to a point  
where East bank of Amazon intersects the equator.  
Latitude 65° 50' West. Established camp-point G.  
Progress normal.

The next day's report reads:

No work today. Rainfall very heavy. Work impossible.

And the next day's report:

No work today. Rain still heavy. Caught two catfish last night. One 186 lbs. The other 238. Caught on whole jungle pigs. Water rising rapidly. More rain coming.

And underneath that, almost as an afterthought it seems, Daddy Leon wrote in script- the big one got away.

Daddy Leon wasn't a liar and it might have rained, but that isn't why they didn't work. They didn't work because Daddy Leon was a swamp rat from Salvation just like my daddy

and just like me and he didn't like nothing so much as trot-lining for catfish and he believed like I believe that if you're going to do something you might as well do it right. We've got good fishing in Louisiana. It doesn't read Sportsman's Paradise on the car tags for nothing, but we don't have two hundred pound catfish. I promise you that. He was fishing those two days. I know it as well as I know my own name.

I've been here near starving for sixty-one days, fishing for you the way Daddy Leon fished for your son. I shot a twenty pound pig and pushed a nylon rope as far down his throat as I could, then slit open his stomach, cut a hole in his windpipe, and pulled the rope through. I tied it to a hay hook, eight inches across from barb to shank, and buried the hook in the pig's belly. I tied the rope to a limber tree top so that when you swallowed the pig and went to jerking, you wouldn't have anything solid to pull against.

I hung a bell on the rope so that if you bit at night, I'd know. Then I waited, Catfish. Much longer than I thought I'd have to, but fishing ain't what it used to be and that's a fact. Ran out of coffee and pot after the first month and saved some cigarettes only by smoking Ty-vines in between. But I waited because I didn't have anywhere else to go. I've been everywhere and done everything and there's nowhere else I want to go and nothing else I want to do. Only this one last thing.

It hasn't been easy. I had to change pigs about every

other day because they rotted and little fish nibbled them off the hook. I've eaten several of your children, good fish all, but I didn't want them. I wanted the one that got away, one over two hundred and fifty pounds. I wanted you. I knew you'd come. I've been here for sixty-one days and for sixty-one nights, I dreamed catfish. Not dreamed about catfish, but in catfish, that I was a catfish, a giant catfish of 250 pounds swimming alone and majestic in the deep black waters of the Amazon. I swam up river with my long searching whiskers tingling at the smell of a bloated, bloody pig. And for the last week, when I dreamed, the tingling on my face was almost unbearable. I could taste that pig, and last night when with my head, bony and blunt, I nudged that soft decaying dinner of a pig, the bell rung and I woke up. Now my brother and my friend, you catfish as big as a shark, we're here together. You sway there in the black water. You struggle against the rope. You must wonder. You must think: "This is not normal. I've seen fifty summers and this is not normal." If that's what you're thinking, Catfish, you're right. It's not normal. But the Virgils haven't lived normal lives. They haven't died normal deaths. And neither will you and I.

I didn't find out for sure until my twelfth birthday that I wasn't normal. I had suspected as much off and on since birth and had begun, it is true, in the last few months before my birthday to believe it more and more, but I wasn't in fact sure until God himself appeared to me and

banished forever from my mind any thoughts of normalcy that I may have held about myself and replaced them with a sense of destiny, a sense of divine mission and purpose, a sense of divine power. And those that have ears, my friend, let them hear: There is no power existing on this earth that does not tremble and sweat with fear in the face of divine power.

I heard gunfire, smelled the stench of burned black powder, and saw Amos Gaines Virgil riding hard atop a slaverred sorrel mare, the reins between his teeth, a Navy revolver in each hand, and four large, green bass flopping wildly on a rope wrapped around his saddle horn. His gray uniform was sticky with blood from a wound in his chest, his face tight and scabbed.

#### DADDY LEON

Yes sir, my daddy was much of a man. His boots is boots that'll be forever empty. He wasn't a surveyor like me, but he was scouting for Jeb Stuart which is a heap more strenuous than surveying, when the Yankees shot him. He'd done eased down the river skirting Yankees more than a mile, looking for a place to get through. He was needing some food bad. He was hungry and the men fighting by him was hungry. Ain't ever been a Virgil yet what didn't have a

fishing line of some sort on him most all time, and when daddy saw a bunch of them largemouth bass up under a willow tree feeding on top of the water like they was mad, he pulled out that braided line he got through the mailorder from England and kiss my ass if he didn't have four of them big bass laying on the bank with a rope stuck through their mouths before you could whistle Dixie. That's what he was doing when the Yankees shot him. Sitting there with that braided line wrapped around his hand, watching his grasshopper float under them willow trees, waiting on another one of them big green trout.

They seen him from across the river and four of 'em went around, gonna come up behind him, but one of them Yankees on the other side, him still just a youngun, got buck fever and plugged daddy before his buddies got around good. It knocked him back a bit, but Virgils don't die easy and before you know it he had them bass hooked on his saddle and was a digging for Jeb Stuart's. When them Yankees what had slipped around behind started firing, daddy give that sorrel a good kick in the ribs and was commencing to ride right through them Yanks with death coming out of each barrel when another squirt of a Yank what couldn't even shave yet stepped out from behind a hickory tree and damned if he didn't, calm as a cow eating grass, draw down and blow a hole big as a half dollar through daddy's right lung. Daddy dropped both of them revolvers he taken off a Yankee Captain at Shiloh, wrapped his arms around the sorrel's

neck, and kept riding. He come a riding up at Jeb's tent, said there was Yankees aplenty across the river, and passed out. Jeb went to the surrel for a look at them trout, lifted the biggest one, said "clean it" and ducked back in his tent.

They taken daddy and propped him up against a wagon wheel, dipped a bandana in a jug of corn whiskey and passed it completely through his body. In the front, out the back. They did it onct, twice, then onct more. Daddy come to about this time and went to praying like any normal dying man would, praying for forgiveness and asking for just one chance more. Said straight out if Jesus could see his way clear to look down and breath a little fresh life on this gut-shot sinner, he wouldn't ever sin no more. Wouldn't sin no more ever, but would spend the rest of his God-given days preaching the word. His comrades, good men all too long from home, knowing Amos Gaines Virgil as an honest and brave man, grieved, for he was dying as they watched. They ripped that bandana in two, sopped it in some whiskey and stuffed it in amongst his lungs. One of them untangled that part of the fishing line still wrapped around his hand, and they sewed him up, sat back, and waited for him to die. They would've waited quite a spell for my daddy to die that day. Cause daddy didn't die. He would for the rest of his life, and it was a life longer than most, spit up pieces of that bloody bandana at the awkwardest times, but he didn't die. And being the Virgil that he was,

he did what he said he would and went straightaway and preached the gospel.

#### GARVIS LEE TEMPLE

My people came to Salvation with Amos Gaines Virgil after the war, and since the Temple men have all been unnaturally fond of breeding, there's about as many Temples in Cocoudrie Parish as anything else. We lived on the Atachafalaya River just up above Virgil Island until the Corps bought us out when they started building the dam. I'd known Amos all my life, but he was younger than me, and we didn't get to be best friends until Daddy Leon came home and I started spending most of my time out at the Holy Ground. That was in 1962. Amos was eleven and I was fifteen. When he first got back, Daddy Leon moved in with his daughter Edith at the old homeplace, but that didn't last long. Miss Edith don't put up with much drinking and Daddy Leon was still down in the bottle pretty good in those days. Nobody ever thought he could live with Miss Edith. She's touched, you see.

My daddy had been with Daddy Leon down in South America when he caught Jonas, so he took to me right off. Later that same year was when Lefty got his arm cut off and started drinking mean and getting in one scrape after another. He had slapped that hook upside the head of more than one man and was in danger of getting a free trip down the river

when Daddy Leon took him in and gave him a place out at the church.

None of the Temples ever went to school much anyways, and when Daddy Leon came back, Amos stopped going his own self. They never said anything about it at the school. I guess they figured he needed to be with Daddy Leon more than he needed schooling. We'd fish for bass in the mornings and run our trotlines at night. Ramsey was learning how to throw with his right hand, and in the afternoons me and Amos would take turns catching for him. Finally he could throw a good knuckleball. Daddy Leon mostly stayed around the church working his pit roosters and cooking. At night he'd tell us about his surveying days, the headhunters in the jungle, the cobras in India, lions in Asia. Ramsey would sit to one side sipping on a jug, listening to Daddy Leon with one ear and a ballgame on the transistor with the other.

I saw Amos every day and he was a boy just like me. I learned to drink on the island and sometimes Daddy Leon and Lefty let me tag along when they went hunting pussy, but Amos never did either one. Not that he was too good for it, he wasn't, just too young to drink or fuck. I don't think his balls had dropped yet. Sometimes at night he'd go down by the river and stand as still as a fence post, staring out like he heard something in the swamp calling his name, but when that happened, he'd just go off by himself. Directly he'd come back fine. Sometimes Daddy Leon



went with him and they'd stay out all night. But hell, half the men in the parish did that. I'm saying that up until he got the call, he was as normal as the rest of us.

I saw Amos Gaines Virgil sitting in a square wooden chair at one end of the long hall. He wore a white shirt and gray wool pants with suspenders. His bare feet rested on dark, packed dirt. Women and children sat scattered at his feet. He was talking to them. I saw a door at the other end of the cabin open and a man, coming from the light, walking into darkness.

#### DADDY LEON

Daddy's preaching is how come we're in Salvation. Without my daddy, Amos Gaines Virgil, there wouldn't be any Salvation. He lit out across the mountains for somewhere he'd never been and came here to Cocoudrie Parish, came here to the swamps and found land that nobody even knew was here, much less owned. And when he got here, he told them that was with him: We shall call this place, Salvation. Here we will build our church and sow the seeds of Armageddon.

Daddy didn't preach by the Bible, not mostly. He didn't use the Bible really much at all on account of him being a prophet because God spoke to him directly. There was some what didn't like him and wanted to hurt him, but

that's natural with prophets and he didn't worry about that. But he was powerful putting the word on them that was there and them that came, and they came from all over, because Daddy's first church was 10 X 10, built from palmetto fronds, and they finished the big one, the one that's still standing, in 1899, the year before my birth, one hundred feet square and every inch a cypress log. They was all out there at the church on Virgil Island. Hadn't been in it more than a piece of the spring when it happened.

It was a man, a grit from Georgia, that came in these parts after my daddy did. He was a smart looking fellow that knew how to take care of his own on account of fighting in the Indian wars out west. His youngest daughter, fourteen at the time, heard the true word and was moved in her heart to be with my daddy. She was there by his right hand listening to him teach when it happened.

Russell came through on the other end. When he got up close they all saw he had a pistol, but nobody said squat about it. Russell looked over at the thin blackheaded girl with the eyes as big as a deer's and told her to get outside to the wagon. Daddy reached over and petted her and told her to stay, said he was there and she was safe. He told Russell:

Been looking for you.

And I'm here.

I knew you'd come.

You're scum of the earth, Amos Virgil.

Daddy said he was a preacher of the word. Russell said Daddy wasn't licensed by any church he knew of and Daddy told him. Said he was a prophet licensed by Jesus Christ to preach the gospel as revealed to him by God. Told Russell to put down the gun. Said he was welcome. Said he ought to be flattered that God had chosen his daughter to carry the seed of the prophet.

You're scum of the earth, Virgil, and I'm about to send you to hell.

You can't hurt me, Russell. God has chosen me. I'm going to live forever.

Russell cocked the pistol. I wasn't thinking on hurting you none, Virgil. Just shooting you.

Daddy looked down and petted the child. She smiled at him.

I been shot before. That's the last thing he ever said because that big pistol exploded in Russell's hand and daddy crashed over backwards in the chair, a bullet in his brain. His blood splattered over the wild-eyed girl.

Yeah, but you ain't been shot tween the eyes with no .45 Long Colt, Russell said. He shoved the pistol in his pants, told the girl, said Git Daughter! and she got. Eight months later that child with the wild bloody eyes--Edwinna was her name--gave her life giving me birth.

When they told Russell his Edwinna was dead he got his gun saying no Virgil was gonna kill his Edwinna and live, but the wetnurse and midwife, both believers in the words

of Amos Gaines Virgil, shut the door and wedged a chair beneath the knob. He beat on the door all night knocking for me, but he didn't get me. Lots have tried to get me, but I'm still here.

After the grit from Georgia dispatched my daddy to the great hereafter, life was never the same on Virgil Island. A church without a leader cannot stand. They stayed out there, though, until the flood of 1902. Virgil Island wasn't even an island then, just a horseshoe bend in the Mississippi, but when the flood came, the river split in two, one half going down through Baton Rouge and New Orleans, the other half, the Atachafalaya, heading down through the middle of Cocoudrie Parish towards the Gulf. That left the Holy Ground near to surrounded by water. My daddy's followers scattered like wind. They're still around up here in Cocoudrie Parish, but mostly they aren't proud of what they did then and won't speak up, but they're up here. Mostly it's only the colored folks that still believe.

Later on when I came of age I tried to lead the people myself, but I failed. Not from lack of effort either. I tried, tried hard, but you can't lead unless you've been called and I was never called. God never spoke to me, not the first time. Luther, my boy, he tried too, but the only thing that ever called Luther was pussy-on-down-the-road.

You don't volunteer to be a prophet, God drafts you, and God drafted Amos before he was born.

AMOS ON THE RIVER  
March, 1985

Chapter 3

Daddy Leon grew up, married, fathered a son, my daddy Luther Virgil, and a daughter, my Aunt Edith, soon after that. It was all there for Daddy Leon. A good name, five thousands acres of mortgage free delta land, a good strong back, and a good mind. And those were times when men of ability and vision were still making fortunes in this country, but it wasn't in the cards for Daddy Leon. He had it all, but like the ancient Greeks who populate the tragedies, he was flawed. That flaw cost him all he had and made him all he was. He wasn't lazy. Wasn't dumb, deformed, or decrepit, and didn't drink. He was just plain sorry. He'd take off trotlining with a toothless nigger in a minute and leave the cotton to the weeds. He'd ride in a wagon three days to Vicksburg just to buy a hog when there were hogs by the hundreds for sale within the shadow of his own nose. He'd go anywhere, anytime, with anybody.

He never stayed still long enough to finish one single thing that I know of. He never meant any harm, but never managed to do any good either.

Just like the flood of 1902 dealt the final blow to the followers of Amos Gaines Virgil, the flood of 1927 did Daddy Leon in. That was the big one. The biggest one ever. The one when the Old Man said: "Fuck it! I don't care who's president, who's rich, who's poor, who's ready or who's not. I'm gonna swell up and flood like a bitch and there ain't nothing nobody can do about it. Just sit back and watch."

And that's what they did. The rains came in the spring and the rains stayed on and the backwater overflowed. When the levee broke up in Arkansas, water was six feet in downtown Salvation, and there wasn't anything above water in Cocoudrie Parish except the church and 40 acres on top of Virgil Island. It's funny to think about, but that's the only time Daddy Leon ever made any money farming. Ever. The Red Cross came out to set up a relief center and they paid Daddy Leon for that scraggly worm-eaten cotton he had in the ground. They wasted that money. Daddy Leon would never have harvested that crop. He'd done the planting and anybody could have told them that from spring planting till fall harvest was way too long for Daddy Leon to stay put in one place.

He was natural more doing some fishing in those days, and the fishing was good, but when the water started

receding and fish by the untold jillions were trapped in the fields, it was out of this world. Daddy Leon was running his lines day and night, catching them right and left, but the fishing was so good that everybody and his brother had all the fish they needed and Daddy Leon couldn't sell the first one.

That's when he lit out. Told everybody there wasn't any money and he had a family to feed and that's not a lie, but it's not the whole truth either. Hell, he was a rich man. Others made it on a lot less than what he had and he could have too. He just didn't want to. He wanted to get the hell out of Dodge and the flood was a good excuse. I'm not saying I blame him. I don't blame him at all. I'm a great believer in lighting out myself. A great believer in new starts. I've done it more times than I've got fingers, but I don't believe in excuses or apologies either and just wanted to set the record straight. You do what you do then live with it.

It seems natural now that he signed on with a Texaco survey crew because surveying is a lot like scouting. It's not a normal life. Most surveyors are half-ass sorry anyhow, so Daddy Leon fit right in and even prospered. It's not a bad life for a single man. If you've got a good line of bullshit, and most surveyors do, you can float it by some darling in this town tonight and be in some other town tomorrow when she discovers it to be what it is. I've been everywhere and everywhere I've been people will believe

anything if you tell it good enough.

Daddy Leon was a hard working sober man and was soon sitting on top of his field, their chief troubleshooter, their main man for ten years. A legend. All over the world, it didn't matter, be it the deserts of Africa, the mountains of Persia, or the jungle of South America. When it was too tough for all the rest, it was meat-on-the table for Daddy Leon. When nobody else could go, the boss got on the phone and said, "Send me Leon!" He could go through swamps, desert, brush, or mountains. It was all the same to him. He'd probably own the damn company by now if your daddy hadn't of driven him crazy.

The day he turned sixteen my daddy left Salvation, caught a plane to South America, and started working with Daddy Leon. Said it was real exciting being down in the jungle here working among real headhunters, said Daddy Leon was the finest boss any man could want. After dark most of the men would sit around playing cards, but Daddy Leon sat in his tent reading the Bible and writing letters. He would get up and fix the men a drink if they were too involved in the poker game to leave, but he never once touched the stuff himself.

One night they came back after dark to find the Indian village they were camped close to in a great uproar. Seems a little boy had wandered off into the jungle and was lost. The boy's own parents wouldn't even go in after him. They could hear the crashing sounds of the jungle animals, the



growling of the jaguars. Daddy Leon didn't even know the child and what the hell difference does it make, one little Indian boy, but Daddy Leon took a lantern and a machette and went in over all objections from his men. He stayed out there nearly all night, but he found that little boy huddled naked and scared under a tree. Daddy Leon was a brave man, I just hope I'm a little braver.

They'd been hearing from the Indians about a catfish bigger than a dugout canoe that lived in the deep waters of the river, but Daddy Leon didn't take it for the truth. I mean a damn stone-age Indian in South America will tell you anything, but when they showed him a set of jawbones as big as a #3 washtub, he started believing and went fishing.

They tried three or four different things before settling on the jungle pig tied to a log. Daddy said when they got the first two big ones, 186 and 238 pounds, everybody was excited, but said he hadn't seen a celebration before or since like the one after they caught the big one, the one that got away. They tied him to a tree just like I did you, then they broke out the whiskey and celebrated. Even Daddy Leon took a little. Took a lot matter of fact and ended up sitting on the bank of the river with a bottle in his hand staring at that catfish and saying, "I got you, Bigboy. You're the biggest one ever and I got you." Once he went for another bottle, and when he got back, the big one was gone. Nobody knows just what happened.

They say he went down fast after that. Turned to shit overnight. Wouldn't stay off the whiskey and wouldn't do anything but fish. Told all the men when they wanted to go back to work: "Fuck it! Let's fish! I've got to catch that bastard." Finally the men started doing the work without him, going on like nothing was wrong while Daddy Leon laid up drunk all day waiting for nightfall when the big cats went to feeding. They all thought it would pass, the truth being that most of them had been drunk more than once, but it didn't. It just got worse. Daddy Leon drank all the whiskey, then started in on that shit the Indians make from tree sap. I've had some of it myself and a man's got to be plenty thirsty to take hold of it, but Daddy Leon did, and laid with it too. Finally daddy went in to talk to him.

Daddy Leon was stretched out on the cot in his undershorts, his eyes bleary and swollen.

"Don't you think it's time to straighten up and go back to work," Daddy said. Daddy Leon raised up on one arm and tried to focus his eyes.

"Son," he said. "It's been a long time, but the best I remember I fucked your mother with a piss-hard and the best part of you ran down the backside of her leg. Why don't you squirm on out of here?"

That did it for my daddy. The supply plane came in a week later and landed on the river, and when it left, daddy was on it. He went back to Salvation and worked

from daylight to dark with Grandma Virgil and Aunt Edith to get a crop in. They received neither word nor money from Daddy Leon all summer. Then in the fall, just before harvest time, Daddy Leon drove down the streets of Salvation in an old pickup truck with that catfish, fresh from a Houston taxidermist, stretched out in the back like a wet, dead log. He parked on Main street even before he went home and told everything to everybody who wanted to know anything about the fish.

"Yes, sir," he said. "That's a big catfish there. Bigger than anything anybody has ever caught before. Seven feet eight inches and 238 pounds. I do believe he's got his full growth. Not that he's the biggest, because he ain't. The big one got away, but this one here is plenty big enough. I'm gonna take him on down to the courthouse and all you good people can see him there."

He went to the Holy Ground and stayed sober, told his family that he was through drinking and was thinking about going back to preaching, and they were all glad. He even helped pick the cotton. They were worried some when he left for town in a wagon loaded with all the cotton, but he wouldn't let daddy go with him and Grandma Virgil said "no" when daddy wanted to sneak along behind. "He needs to go by himself so he'll know we trust him," she said. "He'll be back."

But he didn't come back. Not before dark and not after. They told daddy at the gin that Daddy Leon had

been there all right. "About the middle of the afternoon," they said. "Yes, we did. Four hundred dollars in cash."

Daddy went downtown where in those days Salvation was just one saloon after the other, the citizens having turned to sin in the absence of a real leader. Daddy went in first one then another and met somebody in each one who had seen Daddy Leon that day, but he didn't catch up with him until he went in Wollerson's Hotspot where Newman's Pool Hall is now.

Daddy stepped inside and stood by the door, letting his eyes get accustomed to the darkness. A dozen men sat on stools at the bar. Wollerson leaned over the counter with his head in his hands watching what all the other men were watching: a man and a woman lying naked on the sawdust floor, the woman on her back with her knees drawn up to her armpits, the man between her legs with his head thrown back. Sweat ran down his face. His arms were locked on either side of her shoulders. The men urged him on as he thrust into the woman. They clapped and cheered.

"Go on! Give it to her! Harder! Make her scream!" They threw nickels and quarters down on the sawdust by the rutting couple. Daddy Leon sat on a stool with his hat tilted back, a bottle in his hand. His eyes shined like with a fever. Daddy watched from the doorway as he took a twenty dollar bill from a roll in his pocket, kissed it, and let it flutter to the sawdust.

"Give her one for me, sonny," he said. "I got more

money than Jesus."

That's when daddy bolted from the doorway, rushed for Daddy Leon, and got a death grip on his throat. Daddy Leon was surprised and drunk, but still much of a man, and they say that when the fight was over some time later, he was able to walk out alone, no longer drunk I'm sure. They carried my daddy to the hospital where he stayed for quite some time.

Daddy Leon must have walked a long ways that night because twenty-four years passed before anybody in Salvation ever saw him again.

#### GARVIS LEE TEMPLE

It happened out at Fool River Baptist during a revival. Luther Virgil still pastored the church, but he wasn't preaching that night, this being about a year after he went crazy and took off his shoes.

Brother Terrell was, on a hot Saturday night just after dark when it started. I'd been to a million revivals by then and only reason I was there was I knew a girl named Ginger Jefferson that I thought might lift her leg for me. I was sixteen then and kept a hardon most all time. Ginger was eighteen and just out of high school and the church was the only place we could meet and her still keep her standing in town. She was bad in love with Samuel, my older brother, but the Army had grabbed his ass sometime earlier

and she started giving me the eye. Goddam, I never knew why, but I was sure glad because she had titties as big as your nephew's head and an ass like a wild animal. She's married to some Jew doctor now and I know he's not doing her any good.

That night she was sitting in courtship corner between me and Amos. I knew Amos had never had any and figured if I played it just right she would put out for both of us. Damn it was hot I remember and she was wearing sandals and a yellow summer dress. I could smell her sweating. She crossed her legs and started swinging her foot, rubbing against my leg every time she did. We were all squashed together and her thigh was near to burning against mine. After the singing when the sermon started, me and Ginger crossed our arms where nobody could see us and started playing hands. That went on for awhile, us heating up bit by bit just like the people in the church, but the Good Lord didn't have anything to do with us. We weren't studying nothing but sin.

After a bit she changed positions and moved her arms up higher so her titties were hid too. I thought it might work out because she was reaching for Amos with her other hand, but I don't think he ever caught on. He seemed to be listening to the preaching. Wasn't long, though, till I'd moved my hand right next to her tittie and when she didn't stop me, I started rubbing the bottom of it with my knuckles. She was breathing kind of hard, but nobody heard

her on account of Bro. Terrell's preaching. I liked a good sermon even then, but Bro. Terrell was all soft and white and looked like he had been dead for days. I thought he was queer myself. Mostly the women liked him. But he was preaching that night, up there sweating like a field nigger in a black satin robe that he called sackcloth, wiping his face with tiny white handkerchiefs that he held in each hand. Every woman there was crying like a day old widow.

I guess Ginger got tired of waiting for me to make my move, because she unwrapped her fingers from mine and dipped her shoulder so that I didn't have nothing but a handful of the real thing. I was sitting there as hard as a preacher at a double wedding, just about to find her nipple when it happened.

Suddenly Amos stood up and said real loud: "I'm a damn good fisherman." I wasn't crying though. I was thinking about that catfish of Daddy Leon's down at the courthouse and what it would be like to catch a catfish that big. That's when I heard the voice. It said you, Amos Virgil. You want to be a fisherman? I thought I might be crazy like Aunt Edith. But God spoke to me again. He sounded like Clark Gable. Do you want to be a fisherman? Answer me?

Tench Latimer and his wife were sitting in front of us. She turned around and stared. I know she saw my hardon.

She said: "Hush, Amos. You know better than to talk when Bro. Terrell is preaching." I have chosen you special. You come and follow me and I'll make you the best fisherman ever. Do you understand?

Amos didn't even look at her. He said: "No, Lord. I don't understand."

Mrs. Latimer said: "You ought to be ashamed, Amos." Amos broke out in a big sweat, not like he was hot, but like he was about to faint. He started squeezing the pew in front of us. Later you will see the light, Amos and all will be clear. Now come forward. Profess your faith publically.

Bro. Terrell stopped preaching and the whole church turned around to watch. Me and Ginger stopped too. Amos started to shiver. His hands were turning white on the pew. Get up and move, boy. God himself is talking to you.

He started walking down the aisle. A blinding ball of white light came through the ceiling and settled on the podium behind the pulpit. Jesus, bathed by the light, was sitting on a marble throne. He had long hair and wore khaki pants, a khaki shirt with two pockets, and high top tennis shoes. He may have sounded like Clark Gable, but I knew it was Jesus. Only Jesus can come through a ceiling. I went toward the light, but got no closer. Directly in front of the pulpit, I was no closer than before. He was smiling at me now, almost with amusement.

Amos stopped in front of the pulpit. Even the mosquitoes were quiet. "I'm here, Lord," he said. "What do I do now?" Go fishing. Go fishing and wait. I'll be back when your time has arrived.

Then he said: "Go fishing you say?" That's right. Go fishing and prepare yourself. Now speak to the people



so they will know that you are my prophet. Speak to the people.

One time me and Amos were out frogging and he grabbed a frog on the head at the same time that a big, black cotton-mouth grabbed him on the belly. When Amos turned around and faced the church, he looked just like he did that night frogging. Scared nearly dead. Speak to the people. And I did. They stared at me with dripping liquid faces.

He raised his arms and started talking to us. But it wasn't Amos talking. It didn't even sound like him. His voice was low and calm and what he said didn't make sense. Not at first. The words weren't even words. Just sounds. But there was something there that night. You could feel it. You could see it in Amos. It was like he had seen God. Speak louder Amos.

He started walking down the aisles, moving among the people, still holding his hands out and speaking like he was sleep walking. And lots of people when he walked by them just fell out on the floor, jerking and speaking in tongues and foaming at the mouth.

Bro. Terrell hollered out: "It's a miracle! The last Virgil has been called! Praise God it has happened!"

And I ain't ashamed to say it, when he came by me I fell out too. And it wasn't because I wanted to lie down beside Ginger either. Amos struck me with the Holy Ghost. He struck the whole church.

He never was the same after that, Amos wasn't. Me?

Me, I'd been saved before and was backsliding inside of two weeks. I'm still a believer, but I'm one of those people that God gave a bigger dick to than he did a brain. I saw what happened that night, I felt it, I was there. But that didn't stop me from breeding Ginger Jefferson in the front seat of my pickup at the Parish Fair, and it didn't stop me from plugging Beth Edison in her own bed later on either.

AMOS ON THE RIVER  
March, 1985

Chapter 4

Fuck it, Catfish! I've been high everyway you can get high. Smack coke speed grass hash PCP LSD THC MDA glue sunflower seeds alcohol nicatine caffeine nutmeg gas amyl nitrate opium sodium penethol mescaline peyote jimson weed and nothing touches being a prophet. I've climbed mountains rafted rivers rode bulls motorcycles surfboards crossed the oceans swam beneath them jumped from airplanes and nothing touches being a prophet. I've fucked or been fucked by boys girls adolescents of both sexes men women and morphodykes had blowjobs given blowjobs licked pussy in a dozen different countries and sodomized royalty and nothing touches being a prophet. I've been shot at knifed gassed runover beaten with billyclubs boards whips and chains choked hung poisoned and nothing touches being a prophet. I've killed men women children deer dogs alligators snakes squirrels birds cats coons possumms rats worms bugs and bears

and nothing touches the high that comes with knowing that all things work together for the good of them that love the Lord. Salvation is the ultimate high.

Once I was tapped in. Once I had the power to deny death and control the elements. Once I was one with the son of God. Once I was a prophet. I will be again or I'll be dead.

The day of miracles caught me unawares. June the first, nineteen sixty-seven, my sixteenth birthday. I was in Mark Edison's bed, across the hall from his sister, Beth. His mother and father were asleep upstairs. I hadn't slept all night. The next night I was to be ordained a minister by the colored brethern of Golgatha Baptist church and I didn't know what to say. When God called me, he had promised me a sign. He told me to go fishing and prepare myself and I did, listening daily for his voice, but he never spoke. Not until that morning just before dawn.

"Amos," he said. "This is me, Amos. God. Are you awake?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "I've been awake all night."

"Get up and go to the Holy Ground. Your time is near."

"Is that you, Lord?" I said.

"I said it was didn't I?"

"But where have you been?"

"I've been here."

"But I've been praying and fasting for four years."

"And I've heard every word. Now get up. Go to the

Holy Ground and preach. I'll give you a sign."

I jumped up, dressed, and was easing quietly out the back door when I heard my name. It was Beth, standing in the kitchen rubbing the sleep from her eyes with two soft fists. She was practically naked in a short pink gown. I could see all of her.

"I thought I heard you talking to someone," she said.

"No," I said. "It's just me."

"Where are you going so early?"

"To the Holy Ground."

"Why? You didn't bait your lines, did you?"

"No," I said. "I'm going to pray."

Beth came to me and cupped my face in her hands. She was warm and pressed her breasts against me when she raised up and kissed me quickly on the mouth. She had never done that. "You'll do just fine," she said. "I know you will."

I tore out of there and drove out of town as fast as my truck would take me, which wasn't fast enough to take your breath away because it was ten years old and only hit on four cylinders.

First light was just breaking when I got back home. I halfway expected Aunt Edith to be up. I thought she might have heard the voice. She was tapped in too, but the house was dark and quiet. I grabbed my Bible from the glovebox and went around back. We had three boats then, an eighteen foot Boston Whaler with a 120 Mercury that we used for fishing in the big river, a fourteen foot jon boat

with a 20 horse Mercury, and a piroe. The piroe was gone. Daddy Leon had it, I knew. He would hardly ride in anything else.

I took the jon boat and started down the bayou. I couldn't see much because of a thick mist hanging over the water, but I went wide open anyway. I knew where I was going. Sometimes I'd make the trip with my eyes closed just to see if I could do it. Always did.

When I entered the main river I saw that one of the Clorox jugs I used to mark my trotlined was bobbing in the water, but I didn't stop. I thought it a mudfish; they're the only fish I ever caught on a bare hook, but I wouldn't have stopped for a fifty pound catfish. Not that morning.

In ten minutes I reached the church and tied up next to the piroe. I went up the hill and down the river about a hundred yards to my favorite place: a water oak with huge limbs that crawled over the ground like legs of a giant spider. I stood there with my Bible in front of me and looked out over the forty acre pasture, green with rye grass, that crowned the hill. Ramsey Tarber's cows were huddled together in clumps on the ground. Their breath seemed to be clouds. I stood there waiting, but nothing happened.

"I'm here, Lord," I said, but still nothing. I waited quietly, reverently for God to speak, but I got no answer, no word, no sign. Behind me in the bayou, the bass began their early morning feeding. A redtailed hawk circled above.

No word. The cows stared at me with bored, wet eyes. Their slow chewing of yesterday's cud seemed to be an act of insolence directed towards me. The longer I waited, the angrier I got. There I stood, a true believer on a mission from God, actively seeking the Lord's will in my life, and they didn't even care. Content, they were, to be fattened and led to the slaughter. I was nauseated by their apathy.

"Hey you out there," I said. You call yourselves Christians. Well get up off your asses! Jesus has called me. He has spoken to me as clearly as I am speaking to you now. I am his chosen prophet. When you hear me it is as if you are hearing the voice of God himself." The cows, Brangus and Charolais slowly took their feet and began to graze. Daddy Leon kept several fighting cocks roaming wild on the island, and from behind the church, one of them crowed loud and long.

"You aren't Christians," I said. "Christians have got to take a stand in this world or there will be no world left. Jesus Christ died for you. He gave his life so that you might live! And what do you do? Lay around chewing yesterday's cud. You people had best get it together, because he's coming again and I don't mean Santa Claus. Jesus is coming again to sit in judgement. Avoid external damnation. Repent your sins and receive the Holy Ghost."

Once again the rooster crowed, this time much closer.

"Dare you mock the prophet of God," I said. "Come forth and show yourself."

The rooster appeared at a run from around the church, hopping high in the air and flapping his brightly colored wings as in battle. It was Joe Willie, Daddy Leon's prize rooster. I turned to the cows. "Watch and behold the power of God," I said.

Joe Willie landed between me and the cows, his feet locked in the soft dirt, his hackles spread out in a menacing manner around his neck. He threw back his head and crowed loud and long.

"You've won five fights and you think you're mean," I said, "but you're nothing in the face of divine power." "Nothing." Joe Willie scratched the dirt and crowed in defiance. I clapped my hands together violently.

"Now shut up!" Joe Willie cocked his head and looked at me.

"Get up here!" With a tentative first step Joe Willie began to move towards me, then stopped. I stared deep into his eyes and saw the vanity and pride that lurked there, shining bright like a star.

"Dare you disobey the voice of God? Move!" With an easy leap Joe Willie landed beside my Bible on the limb. I raised my right hand high in the air.

"By the power of God invested in me by Jesus Christ his son, Amos Virgil his prophet forgives you of your sins. Now repent and receive the Holy Ghost!"

As if shot by a rifle, Joe Willie fell over backwards, his long talons locked into the oak limb, his head laying



limp to one side. I turned to the cows. They showed no emotion.

"Are you not convicted of your sins by this display of God's power? Come to the altar and repent." In a single move the herd of cows started towards me, their heads bent low, a mooing of confession coming from their mouths. When they had all gathered before me, I said: "Amos Virgil forgives you of your sins. Now repent and receive the Holy Ghost."

The cows, thirty or forty of them, turned their noses toward the sky and filled the forest with their bawling. It echoed across the water, but didn't faze Joe Willie who still hung over backwards, the rhythm of his breathing making his red tongue flutter like a snake's. A tiny clucking noise rattles in his chest. I began to shiver and sweat. How long I stood there listening to those cows, I don't know. I remember nothing else until I heard Ramsey calling my name.

"Amos, what in God's name is going on?" Ramsey was coming from the church at a fast walk, his nub of an arm cutting the air like a conductor's baton. "Answer me, Amos. What have you done to my cows?"

"I convicted them of their sins. They're talking in tongues."

"Talking in tongues?"

"Yes, sir. I've been preaching to them."

"Preaching to them? What on earth for? They ain't

nothing but cows, Amos. Just cows."

"God spoke to me this morning. Told me to come out here and preach. Said he would give me a sign. I guess this is it."

Ramsey raised his arm to scratch his head, then realized he wasn't wearing his hook. He scratched with his other hand until there was blood on his fingers.

"Oh, it's a sign all right," he said. "A sign of what I don't know, but it's sure as hell a sign."

Suddenly Daddy Leon was standing beside me. He was dressed as usual: brown khaki pants and shirt, gray felt hat and Red Wing boots, but his eyes were clear, his face clean shaven. He looked like he had been sober for a day or two. The doctor had told him either quit drinking or die.

"Leon!" Ramsey said. "Would you just look at. . ."

"Be quiet, Ramsey," Daddy Leon said.

"But. . ."

"Just hush, Ramsey. You don't know nothing about this."

"Morning, Amos," he said.

"Morning."

"What's going on out here?"

"I've been preaching," I said.

"You have, have you?" I nodded.

"Why?"

"God spoke to me this morning just like he did when I got the call. Told me to come out here and preach."

Daddy Leon took off his hat and rubbed his hand through his hair as he looked out over the cows.

"It just might be true," he said, more to himself than to me.

"What's that?" I said.

"I said it just might be true."

"What might be true?"

"All of it, son. It just might all be true."

Just then Ramsey caught sight of Joe Willie.

"Good God, Leon. Look at what he's done to Joe Willie."

"I told you to keep quiet, Ramsey," Daddy Leon said.

"But just look. . ."

"Here," Daddy Leon said as he took a half pint bottle of bourbon from his back pocket. "Take a drink of this and see if you can't calm down." Daddy Leon walked over and gently poked Joe Willie in the chest. "He ain't dead is he?"

"No, sir. He's not dead."

"Then what's he doing?" Ramsey asked as he wiped his mouth. "What's he doing?"

"He's praying for forgiveness," I said. Ramsey groaned and turned the bottle up again.

"Son," Daddy Leon said. "Just exactly what did the Lord tell you this morning?"

"He told me to come to the Holy Ground and he would give me a sign." Daddy Leon just nodded.

Ramsey said: "Then he didn't say nothing about you coming out here and hypnotizing no animals, not my cows nor

Joe Willie either?"

"No, sir. Not exactly he didn't."

"Well, Amos, I don't want to hurt your feelings none, but since it wouldn't be going against the Lord's wishes, you reckon you could get them animals back to normal. Whatever tongue they're talking in is giving me the creeps."

I looked at Daddy Leon. He gave me a short, quick nod, so I said a prayer thanking God for his display of power. When I said "amen", Joe Willie dropped like a rock and landed on his head under the log. He jumped up in a frenzy, hit his head on the log, and went down again. The cows quieted down and started milling around as if waking from a drugged sleep. Ramsey took another drink. He appeared drugged himself. Joe Willie staggered off towards the church.

Ramsey tossed the empty bottle into the bayou.

"I've got to have a drink," he said and started following Joe Willie towards the church.

"Got some bass fillets inside," Daddy Leon said. "Want something to eat?"

"I'm fasting," I said.

"Fasting, huh. Well why wouldn't you?" He stuck out his hand. "Happy Birthday, Amos. Happy Birthday".

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We all three went back in my boat. Ramsey didn't look good. He was beginning to tremor and crouched in the front like he was about to jump out. Four ounces of bourbon would have calmed him down, but the closest drink was five miles away in Salvation. I watched him fight the bugs that swarmed around the scab on his head. One fly was buried in the blood. His legs were still kicking.

When we came to the bayou, Ramsey pointed to the jug I had seen bouncing. It was still bouncing. He agreed with me when I shook my head, "no", but just as he turned around, the jug bobbed once, then sank out of sight. We watched. Then Ramsey stood up.

"Whoa," he said. "We got to see what that is," but I was already turning the boat around. If it was a mudfish, it was the biggest one in Louisiana. I'd never seen a jug stay down that long.

The line was a hundred-hooker tied across the mouth of the bayou between two cypress trees. I eased up beside the tree, and Ramsey took hold with his good arm and started working us down. The line was jerking in his hand as he took a two pound catfish off the first hook, another just like it off the second, and another off the third.

"We've got a good mess here," Ramsey said. He lifted the line as far out of the water as he could. We could see about twenty hooks. They all had catfish on them the same size as the others.

"Would you look at that?" he said. "What did you bait

up with, Amos?" Chicken gizzards? Beef hearts? Crayfish?"

"Nothing," I said.

"Nothing?" He looked at Daddy Leon.

"I didn't want to fool with any fish today," I said.

"I didn't bait a single hook."

Ramsey dropped the line, then grabbed the fish in the boat and threw them back.

"Let's haul ass," he said.

"What about these fish?" I said.

"To hell with the fish. Just get me on dry land."

I looked at Daddy Leon. The snakes and turtles would get half our fish if we left them hooked on the line.

"I'll get them later," he said. "let's go."

When we got home, Ramsey tied the boat, said he'd see us later, and started hotfooting it to town. I offered him a ride, but he was too far down the road to hear me.

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Aunt Edith was sitting on the back porch shelling peas.

"Luther's coming," she said as we walked up.

"How do you know?"

"Oh, I always know when Luther's coming," she said.

I can feel him walking."

"When?" asked Daddy Leon.

"Tonight," she said.

"I kind of thought he would," Daddy Leon said. "Kind of thought he might." He went in the house and came out with a Dixie beer in one hand and a big leather book in the other. He walked straight to the truck and slid in the open door. I followed him.

"Get in," he said. I did.

"I think it's time you read this, son." He tapped the book.

"What is it?"

"My daddy's journal. Written in his own hand. The woman that brought me into this world gave it to me when I was ten. I've had it over sixty years and in that time not another living soul has seen it. You know what's in here, don't you?"

"Not exactly, but there's supposed to be something in it about me, isn't there?"

"There is," he said. "On the last page." He put the book in my lap. "Go on, read it."

I opened it up. The pages were brown and brittle. On the last page I read:

May 31, 1900

I, Amos Gaines Virgil the Prophet of God, will depart from this place tomorrow to walk in the heavens. But my work on this earth is not done and in the sixteenth year of the child who bears my name, born on the anniversary of my death, I will return to plant the seeds of destruction so that all may see the wrath of God. Wonderous works will mark the day of my return. Have faith. It shall be as I have written. Until that day I will say no more.

It was signed by Amos Gaines Virgil. I looked at Daddy Leon.

"My daddy was killed the next day," he said.

"What does this mean?"

Daddy Leon drank from his beer and spit.

"What does this mean?" Still he looked away. I grabbed his shoulder and forced him to look at me. "Tell me what this means."

"I wish I could tell you, but. . .

"Tell me! What does this mean?"

"How the hell do I know? Huh? How the hell do I know? I'm not a prophet. You tell me what it means. I know that my daddy was a prophet and he wrote that in 1900 and you're here just like he said you'd be out there at the Holy Ground conjuring cows and chickens. How the hell do I know?" He drained his beer and belched.

"But I'll tell you something, Amos. I'm gonna drink me another beer then go tend to them fish and Joe Willie, but you can bet your life that my young ass will be in town tonight for the preaching. I've waited sixty years for this. I aim to see just what the hell does happen." He got out of the truck and walked toward the house. He stopped short and turned to me. "You can keep the book, Amos. It belongs to you now."



AMOS ON THE RIVER  
March, 1985

Chapter 5

Now Catfish, don't think that just because I was a prophet and God spoke to me directly that I wasn't confused. I was. Even though the Lord had promised that I would see the light and all would be clear, nothing was clear. The journal only made things worse. I knew that something was happening, but I didn't know what. I knew I had hypnotized some cows and a chicken and caught 200 pounds of catfish without baiting a hook, but that's all I knew and that wasn't enough.

I didn't get back to the Edison house until late afternoon. They lived two blocks off Main Street in a rambling two-story house bordered on three sides by a high hedge. They had moved there from New Orleans when the Corp started building the dam and appointed Mr. Edison chief field engineer on the job. In the six months they had been in town, Maggie had spent thousands of dollars remodeling the house. I don't know how I managed to get mixed up with a

family of outsiders, but by this time I had practically taken Mark's bedroom for my own. They didn't know when Mark would be home, if ever. He was living in a cave in Taos, New Mexico.

Maggie met me at the back door.

"Amos," she said, "Where on earth have you been all day? Sissy and I wanted to take you shopping for your birthday." She took my arm and pulled me up the steps, kissing me quickly on the cheek. "Come in here, son. We've got to get you clean, clothed, and fed."

"Nothing to eat for me," I said.

"That's nonsense, Amos. You can't expect to do your best if you don't eat."

"Jesus fasted forty days before beginning his ministry. I guess I can last four. I'd like some coffee though."

Maggie sat the coffee on the table.

"Let me get Sissy out of the tub. You can use her bathroom," she said.

Before my coffee cooled enough to drink, Beth came into the kitchen wearing a white towel and sat across from me. She leaned over the table.

"I missed you today," she said.

"I missed you too," I said.

"Don't you believe him," Maggie said as she came striding into the kitchen. "He doesn't even know you're alive. He comes over here to see me."

Beth twisted her lips in a mock pout. "Is that true,

Amos? Do you really come over here to see her. And all this time I thought you. . ."

"I like you both," I said.

"Don't you believe him, Sissy," Maggie said.

Just then Mr. Edison opened the door, but before he could get inside, Maggie jumped him.

"Walter Edison, don't you dare take another step inside my house with that obscene trash in your mouth. You get outside and get rid of it this minute."

He bowed low to Maggie and started backing out the door, bowing the whole time. I like him a lot, but never understood why he let Maggie run over him like he did. It had to be in the bedroom. Maggie was a large woman with fish-thin lips, but still curvy and attractive in a once-a-week sort of way. Nothing else could explain it. It had to be in the bedroom.

Walter came back in smiling and sat down at the table. He started to speak to me, but then saw Beth.

"Beth, what in the world are you doing sitting there half naked. Get up and put some clothes on."

Beth reached up and tousled her wet hair. Her underarms were as smooth as peanut butter and the color of pine cones.

"It's summertime, daddy-"

"I know it's summertime, but I still don't want you sitting there half naked. Now get up and go."

"Oh, Walter, stop being such a prude," Maggie said as she sat a cup of coffee down in front of Mr. Edison. "You used to powder her bottom when she wet her diapers."

"It's not me I'm worried about. I was thinking about our young preacher here. If he's going to save the world in an hour, he doesn't need to be distracted now."

"Oh don't worry about me," I said. "I'm not distracted."

"What did I tell you, Sissy? He doesn't even know you're alive. Go on and get dressed so Amos can use your bathroom," she said.

I watched her buttocks sway beneath the towel as she walked across the carpet. She was a healthy fourteen year old. Anybody could see that.

I was finishing my coffee when she returned.

"Bathroom's all yours, Amos. I've laid everything out for you."

The bathroom had French doors and plush white carpet, the first carpeted bathroom I'd ever seen. The huge tub sat several inches off the floor on tiger paws of cast iron. I stripped and reached down to run the water. That's when I saw them. Draped across the front of the tub, a pair of tiny pink panties. There wasn't enough material there to make a glove for a midget. I touched them. They were smooth. I picked them up. I smelled them, and the God's awful truth is that I rubbed them all over my face. They had no odor, no smell of sex that I could tell, but for one brief moment I imagined them pulled tight between Beth's legs, imagined

what they must smell like then. Instantly I pushed the thought from my mind. You can't control what thought pops into your brain, but dwelling on it, rolling it around and savoring it, that's a sin. But I couldn't get rid of it, could feel it hanging around in the outskirts of my brain. I turned the cold water on wide open and jumped in.

I was drying off in front of the full-length mirror when I heard a knock on the door.

"Amos," Maggie said. "Are you decent?"

"Not quite," I answered.

"There's a man at the back door, Amos. He said he had to see you."

"Who is it?"

"I don't know. He wouldn't give his name."

"Tell him I'll be right out."

"Amos, he's a nig. . . he's a black man."

I opened the door. Barefooted, I was wearing Levis and a white shirt.

"You aren't wearing that tonight are you?"

"Why not? This is what I always wear," I said.

"But you're being ordained tonight."

"So what. John the Baptist wore animal skins. This'll do fine. Let's see what this black man wants."

He was standing outside in the carport. I'd never seen him before. Tall and lean, he looked to be in his twenties. He wore a nylon stocking rolled down on his head and an army field jacket. His stubbly beard didn't

hide a nasty scar that followed the jawbone of his left cheek. He watched me with cold, dead eyes when I went outside, but didn't speak until Maggie closed the door.

"You Amos Virgil?"

"I am. Who are you?"

"Don't matter who I am. Grandaddy said come get you."

"Do I know your grandaddy?"

"Do you know Ancient Bass?"

"I do."

"Then you know my grandaddy. He said for you to come quick."

"But I'm preaching in an hour. He knows that."

"Don't matter none to me. He said tell you. I told you."

"Do you know what he wants?"

"Wants you to come quick."

"You said that already. Do you know why?"

"Nope."

I looked at my watch. Almost seven. The service was at eight. The black man stood there sneering at the house.

"This your house?" he said.

"No. I'm just a guest," I said. "How did you get here?"

"Walked on my feet."

"Well, wait till I get my shoes on and we'll ride over in my truck." I turned and started back in the house.

"I ain't waiting."

"What's that?"

"I said I ain't waiting. This is one nigger from Detroit that's done waiting on white men forever."

"You from Detroit?"

"Said I was didn't I."

"Yes, I guess you did, but you're not in Detroit now. This is Salvation."

"Don't matter. You still a white man and I still ain't waiting."

I looked in his eyes, trying to find some clue to his anger, but there was nothing. He stared back without wavering as our eyes locked. Neither of us spoke until I spit to one side and said: "Well, if you ain't waiting, let's go. We walked across to my truck in silence.

Ancient Bass had been my best friend since birth. A giant Christian and a giant man, he had been named Ancient at birth because his mother carried him ten months. Some said eleven. He came to the Lord as a child at a revival that Daddy Leon preached before he left for South America, but Daddy Leon shouldn't get too much credit for that as Ancient's father, a former slave in Alabama, had been one of Amos Gaines Virgil's first followers. Ancient had lived his entire life in a small house on the north end of the Holy Ground, but due to his failing health had moved to town where he picked up a few nickels sharpening saws and scissors. Most of what money he made, which was damn little, came from the contributions of those who came to him seeking spiritual advice.

With me still a child and Luther crazy and Daddy Leon a drunk, Ancient was the dominant spiritual force in Salvation. He was an elder of the Golgatha Baptist Church, the last refuge for the true believers. Other descendents of those who followed Amos Gaines Virgil still lived in Cocoudrie Parish, mostly that's all who lived there, but they had forgotten the faith of their fathers and worshipped in the carpeted sanctuary of First Baptist. They were hypocrites, chasing the dollar all week and each other's wives all weekend. Only the three or four dozen families of Golgatha Baptist still believed, but that was enough. For ten righteous men Sodom and Gomorrah could have been saved. I was to be ordained in their church that night. If Ancient had sent for me on such short notice, it had to be important. I was meditating on what it could be when the black man spoke.

"I heard of you from my mama. You're a preacher ain't you, a fanatic just like granddaddy Ancient."

"Just like him," I said.

"I thought so," he said.

"Oletha must be your mama."

"She is."

"I've heard Ancient talk about her. She left town just before I was born. They say she was the most beautiful woman in the parish." He said nothing.

"Got a name?" I asked.

"Gravy."



"I'm pleased to meet you, Gravy. How are things in Detroit?"

"Bad if you're black. Always been bad and always will be bad. But I ain't been in Detroit."

"Where've you been?"

"Vietnam," he said.

"Vietnam?" I said.

"Vietnam." he said.

"Well," I said. "How was it in Vietnam?"

"It was fun," he said.

"It was fun?" I said.

"It was fun." he said.

There was no further conversation between us on that occasion.

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Ancient's house was nothing more than a tarpaper shack in the black part of town across the slough. A makeshift lean-to of chicken wire and tin on the back of his house served as a workshop. When we arrived, I waited outside while Gravy went in without knocking. Soon Ancient's wife Femolly, appeared. She bent and kissed my hand and led me inside.

"Come in, Amos, please," she said. "He's been in a

bad way."

The house was dark and musty and smelled of candles and ointment. A portrait of Jesus painted on black velvet stared at me from the wall, his crown of thorns changed to a halo by an electric bulb.

"Just this afternoon his fever broke and he started asking for you," Femolly said. "Go in now. He's waiting for you."

Ancient was lying flat on his back in the bed, the covers pulled up to his chin. His breathing was labored and beads of sweat flowed down the lines of his face. In the dim light of a candle burning next to a Bible on his nightstand, I could see that his eyes were closed. I sat in the chair by his bed.

"Father Ancient," I said. "It's me. Amos." He opened his eyes slowly and turned his face toward me. His eyes were cloudy and covered with a milky gauze like those of a snake when shedding his skin.

"Amos, my son. Take my hand. Give me strength. I am very tired." I took his gnarled, callused hand in mine. He had no strength in his grip. Femolly touched my shoulder and handed me a wet rag. I wiped his brow.

"You are in great danger, my son," he said. "Your very soul is hanging in the balance. I have seen it in a vision."

I smiled at him and stroked his forehead as he closed his eyes and rested. "No, Father Ancient," I said. "I am in no danger. I am mighty in the bosom of the Lord and

nothing can harm me. You are ill."

"Amos, my son," he said. "You do not understand! You must believe me!" He seemed to take on new strength and squeezed my hand. "For three days I have fought with the devil for your soul. I have tried to protect you, but I can do nothing more. I am old and weak."

He sighed deeply, sweating and fretting like a child with the flu.

"I am Amos Virgil," I said, "the great-grandson of Amos Gaines Virgil, a true believer in the word of God Almighty. Satan can do me no harm."

"I know who you are, my son," he said. "And I know what you were put here to do, but do not underestimate the strength of evil. Satan is frightened of the power that God has given you. He will attack you before your powers mature. He is here now. In this room. Watching us."

Suddenly I sensed the presence of another in the room. A warm tingling rash spread across my neck. Quickly I looked around, but we were alone.

"Tonight he will visit you," Ancient said. "He is very strong and you are very young. Tonight he will try to steal your soul. You must fight him."

Suddenly he was racked by a powerful cough. I wiped the spit from his chin and held his head in my hands while he sucked drops of water from the rag. His eyes were almost completely cloggen now by the milky mucous. Though God had spoken to me directly, I knew little of Satan's

power, but if Ancient said he had been fighting for my soul, I knew it to be true.

"Father Ancient," I said. "Guide me. Direct me. What must I do?"

"I cannot help you, Amos. I have done all I can. But you are not alone. God has sent you a disciple. He is here now."

I felt that burning on my neck again and once more I looked around the room. Gravy stood in the hallway behind me. Only the glow of his cigarette revealed his position. I looked back to Ancient.

"Gravy, my grandson," he said. "The son of Oletha my daughter. Today he has arrived with his sister, Bodica. He has been sent by God to save you and your ministry."

"Gravy," I said. "But how can that be, Father Ancient? Gravy is a nonbeliever."

"I have seen it in the vision, my son. God has sent him to serve you and protect you as I have served and protected the teachings of the prophet. But first, my son, you must save him, for only then can he protect you and your work from harm. I have seen it in the vision. His life will be my reward. Go now, my son, and let me rest. But beware. Tonight you will be visited by the strength of all evil. At all times watch, my son. Watch."

I left Ancient sleeping soundly. Outside, Gravy leaned against my truck. He was smoking and wearing shades even though the sun had vanished. I asked him about coming to

the church.

"You know where it is don't you?"

"I know. but I ain't coming."

"We'd be glad to have you," I said. Gravy toked on the first joint I'd ever seen.

"Don't it say in the book somewheres that a man can't serve two masters?" he asked.

"It does," I said. "In the sixth chapter of Matthew."

"Well there you are. I'm done serving any master but me. I don't need no other."

"You might one day," I said.

"Maybe. One day, but you can bet your mama's ass that I won't come looking in no white man's church."

"There is only one church," I said. "For white and black alike. We are all God's children."

"You're just like the old man," Gravy said. "All the time talking about God and salvation. Where'd it get him? Ain't he dying in a tarpaper shack just like every nigger before him? Well ain't he! If that's the best God can do, then fuck him! And the angel he rode in on. Fuck them both! You honkey's kept us down with all that meek shall inherit the earth shit. Well fuck that too. We know better now. We ain't gone inherit a damn thing. We gone take it! We gone take what we want and burn you honkey motherfuckers to the ground. See what your God does for you then, sucker."

Watching him walk away into the night, I knew then that if Gravy was to be saved, God himself would have to do it.

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I circled by the church on the way to the Edison house. A black deacon named General Washington Jones stood by the side of the road stopping each car and talking to the driver.

"Ain't you heard, Bro. Amos?" he said when I pulled up.

"Heard what?"

"The preaching's been moved. Was so many people coming we couldn't fit'm in the church. It's out to the fairgrounds now."

"The fairgrounds?"

"Glory to God don't the Lord provide. Bro. Luther is three miles west of town walking this way, but he sent his truck on ahead with the tent. Got it set up now. He said we could use it all week."

"He did?"

"Yessir. We gone have a fine revival, a fine revival. You best get out there. And listen, Bro. Amos," he grabbed my hand and squeezed it. "You powerful preach the Word," he said. "You powerful preach the Word."

And I did powerful preach the word, just a bit later than expected because my truck died as I drove across town to get my shoes. The fuel filter was clogged. I didn't have time to go to the Edison house so I rolled up my pants and started for the fairgrounds at a run. I went the back way through the woods by the girl scout hut but still I

got there thirty minutes late with mud splattered over my white shirt and jeans.

Luther's truck, a Peterbilt with LUTHER VIRGIL AND THE LOVE CRUSADERS painted in red on either side, was parked around back and I gave water on the wheel as the organ played LORD SEND A REVIVAL. George Washington Jones stepped through the curtain that served as a back entrance to the tent. I whistled at him.

"Is everything ready?" I asked.

"Been ready. Got a good crowd too. I'll be leading tonight. Bro. Ancient's down sick."

"I know."

"The deacons is all praying there in the bus if you want to join them. I'll let them know inside we're ready."

When I walked down the aisle of the bus the deacons saw my clothes and wanted to know what happened, but I dismissed their questions.

"Wherever two or more are gathered together in my name I am there saith the Lord. Let us pray in the presence of the Lord." We knelt and prayed to our creator. And there in that bus a miracle greater than those to follow took place. A man of flesh and blood was transformed into an instrument of God Almighty himself. Power floated on the very currents of the air and I breathed freely and was filled. My time had come and I knew it.

I was ready. Those people out there wanted me. Wanted what I had. Wanted the power of God to come through me and

and fill them, to free them from the boredom and anguish that filled their puny lives, wanted me to rescue them from the misery of their own individual hells, wanted me to give them the vitality they couldn't get for themselves, wanted me to give them eternal salvation. And I was ready.

Someone knocked softly on the window. We stood up and I embraced the deacons one by one. Bro. Jones led the way down the bus and through the back curtain. The six deacons stood facing the crowd with their arms folded until I came in. A murmur swept over the congregation when they saw me and my clothes. The deacons moved to the left side of the platform and sat facing the crowd. I sat alone on the right.

Salvation was ripe for a revival and I expected a good crowd, but nothing like what showed up. Luther's tent held four hundred at least, and there were people standing up in back. And what a crowd too. The true believers of Golgatha up front were surrounded by the respectable Christians from First Baptist. The mayor and his wife, the sheriff and his wife, the principal and his wife, Maggie and Beth, all sitting in the same metal chairs with their feet on sawdust. White women in their new summer outfits sitting by black men in work clothes. There were more plastic Christians there than those that spoke with the Holy Ghost.

What were they doing there? Did they think this was a circus? Cheap entertainment? A freak show? Men like Quentin McDuff the tax assessor who hadn't been inside a church since last Christmas, a thieving bastard who paid



for his secretary's pussy with tax payers' money. What was he doing there? Or Matt Coker the sheriff with a mane of silver hair who arrested Veronica Griffin at least once a weekend every weekend and carried her beautiful black body upstairs for a jailhouse ball. What was he doing there? And Big Jim Jackson who owned the Ford place. He spent two months every year at his deer camp on the river and didn't take his rifle out of the case until the night before returning home when he would sober up long enough to shoot three or four doe with the help of a spotlight. What was he doing there? I thought of Jesus driving the moneychangers out of the Holy Temple with a whip and a wrath came over me that caused knots like wasp stings to break out on my skin.

Throughout the first part of the service I sat as still as a dead man. I refused the hymn book that Bro. Jones offered me and sat looking over the congregation without moving, without smiling, without doing any of those things to acknowledge the crowd that most would have thought gracious. Beth smiled at me, but I didn't smile back. I had no time for children then.

After the singing they dismissed the choir and let them join the congregation. I sat there painfully close to internal combustion while George Washington Jones gave me an introduction that would have made Jesus Christ himself blush like a virgin. When he finished, the deacons left their seats and moved down to stand in front of the pulpit.

I went and knelt in front of them.

"God has called Amos Virgil to full-time service as a minister of the gospel. We, the brethern of Golgatha Baptist Church and their guests, are here in accordance with God's wishes to ordain him as our pastor. Let it be done."

Bro. Jones turned and washed his hands in a saucer of water then laid them on my head. He raised his right arm.

"Do you, Amos Virgil, promise always to love and cherish the Lord and do his biddings?"

"I do," I said.

"Do you accept God's call?"

"I do."

"And we accept you. Be blessed and take your place among the blessed."

The process was repeated five more times.

"And now," Bro. Jones said, "I proclaim you to be fully vested with the powers of the ministry according to the laws of God and the state of Louisiana. Stand up Rev. Virgil and preach to your flock."

Quickly I stood, walked behind the pulpit, and turned to face my congregation. They looked at me with the expectant faces of a dog waiting for his master. I said nothing. It came from the back, a single hesitant clap. Then another. Then one from the front. Aunt Edith stood first, then a general swelling of applause that swept over the congregation like a wave and built to a thunderous ovation

as they all stood looking at me and clapping.

Why were they applauding for me. Because I was a prophet? A prophet needs no justification from mortal man. The first shall be last and yet they were clapping for me. The spectacle they made of themselves nauseated me. The outrage that had been boiling in my spleen rose through my body, saturated my brain and found release through my eyes. I looked at them, let my eyes fall on them everyone, men, women, and children, sinners all, on entire rows of chairs and finally on whole sections of the crowd. The applause died. One by one they sat down. The shuffling of their feet filled the tent, and in the instant of silence that followed, the entire promise of my past was realized and I achieved a perfection that has never come to me again. The power that made Amos Gaines Virgil a prophet to those seeking salvation was there in me that night and made me, Amos Virgil, a living sacrifice for God. For I am sure of this: no one achieves perfection without paying for it. We get what we pay for and I have spent my whole life paying for the rage that burned there in my eyes that night.

I could have talked to them, explained to them God's plan for our lives, swayed them with the same slick rhetoric that others pass off as preaching, but I had no need of fancy words for I was in harmony, perfect harmony, with the Holy Spirit and power radiated from the center of my soul like the heat from the sun.

I looked at them, and with my eyes, I convicted them of

their sins. I stood there alone and silent and unafraid and said nothing until I heard the quiet sounds of soft weeping. And then I preached them a sermon that fanned whatever tiny bit of passion they had, that passion that lay wrinkled and dead in the bottom of their souls and the tent stunk from the smell of the sin that oozed like mud from the pores of their skin.

#### GARVIS LEE TEMPLE

I don't know about all that other stuff. Some say they've seen him walk on the water. I haven't, but I know what I've seen and I know he's a prophet who could walk on the water if he wanted to.

I passed my GED and hired on with Bell telephone in the fall of 1965. I got hurt later on that same year. They had us taking down that old line by the Dummyline Road. I was the monkey on the job and climbed up this one pole to cut the line like I had a thousand times before, but turns out this pole was eat up by termites and nothing but a shell and when I cut the line the damn thing snapped and fell over on me. Almost killed me too. Would have except the ground was wet and the pole squashed me down in the mud. They took a picture of the hole. It looked like where somebody had stamped out a cookie. As it was it broke my legs and arms and ribs and punctured my lung and

ruptured my spleen. My gonads swelled to the size of grapefruits, but thank the Lord they went down again.

I spent four months in Intensive Care at the Baptist Hospital in New Orleans and my bones healed, but the worst of it was I couldn't talk. Couldn't make a sound. I knew how to talk and could say the words, but nothing came out. It was like a radio that worked just fine but didn't have any speakers. The company was real nice and paid all my bills and sent me to specialists in Atlanta and Dallas and New York, but they all said the same thing, said I'd never talk again.

The way they explained it to me was when I fell, I landed in such a way that the far end of my vocal cords was torn away and uprooted and just hanging there fluttering like a broken guitar string. They said they couldn't fix it and I better get used to silence because I wasn't ever going to talk again. Vocal cords don't grow back. I wasn't too mad because they paid me two hundred thousand, but I gave up trying to talk.

I didn't really mind it all that much. I can't say that I ever got more pussy when I couldn't talk than when I could, but it was pussy of a different kind, older mostly, but fresher. I tell you lots of those married women blush faster than teenagers. The thing is, when you can't talk the women say it all for you. You never have to worry about being turned down, not that I ever was or did. I learned

how it went after I started doing handyman work to keep busy. I'd go inside to see what needed doing and they'd check me out good and after a bit offer me some coffee. It would usually start right there at the table before the coffee even cooled.

"I know why you're looking at me like that," they'd say. I'd smile.

"You're wondering what my breasts look like aren't you?" I'd smile some more.

"You're wondering what they feel like aren't you?" I'd smile, then look down and stir my coffee, and when I looked up, they'd be staring me right in the eyes and slowly working the buttons on their blouses. I tell you it's housewives by the dozen here all alone in Salvation while their husbands is out for a week at the time on an oil rig in the Gulf, and if they know you can't tell the world where you got it, they'll give it to you. About once a year to this day I'll load my tools up on my truck and go get a room somewhere out in Texas or Mississippi and stay there for a week passing around my card that says I'm looking for work and can't talk. It still does the trick. Usually I can get six or seven, not counting repeats, in a good week.

That night when Amos got ordained I was sitting over on the arena fence watching the people as they went in. It was a big crowd, black and white together, and I felt real good about my chances of getting laid. You put me in

most any kind of crowd and I can usually find something, but in a revival crowd it's nearly a sure thing. There were several prospects there too, but none close to Beth Edison. This was in 1967, but she was a woman even then. She came with her mother who didn't look too bad herself, a little heavy in the hips maybe, but I like hefty women. She's too old and ugly now, but I would have plugged her then for sure and been proud of it too, though there's some around here that say I never had a piece yet I wasn't proud of, and that's probably true.

It was a hot night and Beth came strolling through the crowd like a New Orleans dream in a short white dress and sandals with white straps that laced across those wonderful golden legs and tied under the knee. The dress looked like a man's t-shirt, but Amos told me later that Maggie gave ninety dollars for it in Lake Charles. It clung to her ass when she walked and I could see her panties underneath. She had been out to the Holy Ground with Amos before, and when she saw me, she smiled. Her teeth were as white as the earrings that dangled from her ears. I wanted some of her real bad, but didn't go after it on account of Amos. But I thought about it. Hell, they didn't even belong together anyway, Amos trying to be a prophet and Beth looking just exactly like fuck itself. I climbed off the fence just so I could watch her baby plump butt sway down the aisle. It's no wonder she drove Amos crazy. She boiled my blood,

and she knew it too. It's a miracle Amos was even able to preach that night with her sitting there ripe to the point of bursting right before his eyes. But Amos was blind. I guess that's why the sun seemed so bright when he finally opened his eyes. I still think about her sometimes, even though she's the Governor's squeeze now and not likely to ever lie down with me again. But I still think about it, and sometimes when I see the Governor on tv, I laugh because I got it before he did.

I climbed back on the fence and sat there watching the moon and listening to them sing hymns. You see more and hear more when you can't talk, and I was getting in a religious mood myself. I had always believed in the Lord, but mostly I've been happy all my life. I like where I live and what I do and did then. I'm grateful, understand, but the Lord didn't call me. He just dropped me off here in the swamps and forgot about me because he knows I can take care of myself and he's got enough to do in the cities. I kind of forgot about him too. But Amos. . . .Amos never forgot.

Daddy Leon and Ramsey got there late, Daddy Leon about half drunk. Ramsey was drunk, a mean and surly drunk too, but we all took another sip when Ramsey produced a bottle. He had that look in his eyes and I knew there would be trouble somewhere sometime that night, but never expected it at the revival. He was telling me about Amos preaching



to Joe Willie when there came a big applause from inside the tent. Daddy Leon went over to see what was happening, and since there wasn't any leg roaming around loose in the parking lot, I left the bottle with Ramsey and followed him.

I was stunned when I saw Amos up there on the platform. He was barefooted and his shirt splattered with mud, but a blind man could have seen that he was serious about preaching that night. He looked mad enough to choke somebody and sparks flew from his eyes.

He really got going after a bit and the true believers were helping him along with Amens and Praise the Lords and Hallelujahs, but the outsiders were sitting there like they were afraid to even turn around and look. Wasn't long before I heard Ramsey pushing his way through the crowd of men gathered at the entrance. He was cussing and making lots of racket. I turned around just as Quentin McDuff held up his finger and asked Ramsey to quiet down. I saw it coming, had seen it too many times before, but there wasn't nothing I could do.

Ramsey said: "Be quiet yourself, asshole," and slammed that hook upside his head. Quentin went down and stayed down but Jed, his brother, jumped up and Ramsey dropped him with a right cross between the eyes. I got to him by this time and tried to point him outside, but he grabbed me by the neck and flung me over four rows of chairs like I was

a doll. It broke out in earnest then and Ramsey had six men down on the sawdust before Amos hollered at him.

"Ramsey Tarber!" he yelled. Everybody stopped. When Ramsey turned around to face Amos, we grabbed him and pinned his arms.

"No," Amos said. "Let him go." We didn't want to, but we did. Ramsey's still a good man today even though he's put on some pounds, but he was deadly in those days.

"Ramsey Tarber! Dare you bring your drunken brawl into God's house?"

"God's house?" Ramsey said. "God's house, you say. Where is he? I don't see him. Tell him to come out. I want to order a new arm." He raised his hook up in the air. "This one here's got blood on it." It did too, some his, some not.

"God is here, Ramsey Tarber. Believe me, he is here. Come forward and see God and be healed."

Ramsey weaved down the aisle, looking from side to side and waving his hook like a trophy.

"Can you heal this?" he said. "Can you give me a new arm. Can you give me one like the last one, one that can throw a baseball past any man alive? Can you do that? Can your God do that?"

"Look at him," Amos said. "All of you, turn in your chairs and see what's become of the great Ramsey Tarber. Look at him. You've seen him every morning before breakfast

for the past five years as he staggers stinking and dirty toward his first drink of the day. And now he want to be healed so he doesn't have to be a bum, so he can be somebody again and the sinners in New York will know his name and buy him drinks and give him their daughters for the night."

Ramsey stopped in his tracks.

"Go on preacher boy," he said. "Heal me. You said you could. Let's see it."

"Listen to him," Amos said. "Isn't he the most pitiful, pathetic excuse for a man you've ever seen. I can heal you, Ramsey," Amos said. "I can make you whole again."

"Then quit talking about it and do it. We're all waiting. Saving a rooster is one thing, but making a new arm is another." Ramsey turned around and faced the crowd. "Don't you people see. He can't heal me. He's no prophet. He's just another preacher."

"You all know this man," Amos said. "You all hear him blaspheming the name of God and his prophet. I can feel the power of God growing inside me as I speak. He has granted a miracle so all will know that I am the resurrection of the prophet. Watch and behold the power of God."

Amos raised his right hand high in the air.

"From this day forward, Ramsey Tarber will be a new man. From this day forward his life shall be changed from darkness to light, the sins of his childhood forgotten, the drunken debacle of the last long years erased. From this

day forward for time eternal his life shall be a living revelation of God's power, for from this moment everafter until the end of time, Ramsey Tarber will be a leader in the community and a pillar of the church, loved and respected by all who know his name. Watch and remember his day of salvation so you might believe in your times of weakness."

Amos jumped off the platform and stood in front of Ramsey.

"Behold it is written: 'And the sins of his heart are made manifest and falling down on his face he shall worship God.'"

Amos drew back and slapped Ramsey full-force across the face. Ramsey's head snapped around and seemed to lock sideways.

"Repent, Ramsey Tarber! See God and be healed!"

The tent was so quiet you could have heard a fetus fart. Ramsey started to whimper and shake like a wet dog. I could see his back quivering as he cried harder and louder. The tent seemed like something alive and began to breath and hum, and Ramsey crumpled to his knees and fell face first onto the sawdust, weeping in great heaving sobs. His sobs became a long painful wail.

The church erupted into forty different tongues.

"Look at him," Amos said. "Is his heart not healed? Behold the power of the prophet and be saved."

But the Christians from First Church just sat there like they saw this every day. They might as well been waiting for a haircut. Amos seemed to swell up bigger and bigger and stalked aback and forth across the platform. Suddenly he turned to the crowd.

"What did you people come out here expecting to see?" he said. "You come out slumming with the poor, uneducated Christians and we give you a miracle and still you are not moved. What will it take to make you believe? Must you see more? Must you take from me all I have to give? Look around you. Is this not enough?"

Amos bowed his head and stood quietly while all around him the true believers spoke with the Holy Ghost. He raised up and looked me dead in the eyes.

"Garvis Lee!" he yelled. "Garvis Lee Temple!"

My heart started pounding as soon as he called my name. I raised my hand.

"Come up here, Garvis Lee. Come up here and stand by the Prophet." I did.

He stood with his arm around my shoulders until the crowd quieted down. I could hear Ramsey crying in the sawdust.

"This is my dear friend, Garvis Lee Temple," he said. "Talk to the people, Garvis Lee. Tell them how you were there the night I got the call. Tell them how the Holy Ghost came down and wrapped the church like a glove and many

were saved. Tell them."

Amos knew I couldn't talk. I saw him every day and never once talked. I didn't know what to do, so I just stood there looing at the people. Then Amos grabbed my shoulders and started shaking me.

"Talk to them, Garvis Lee! Talk to them now!"

He shook me harder and I bit my tongue near clean through. I'd had too much to drink for that kind of treatment and puke colored with blood started falling from the corner of my mouth. I tried to keep it in, but he kept shaking me and screaming at me.

"Talk to them, Garvis Lee!" he said. "Testify!"

He slapped me across the mouth with the back of his hand and vomit flew over the platform. Some got on his shirt. He slapped me again and again and again, harder and harder, and I puked all the booze and some vegetable soup too.

"Don't hit him no more, Bro. Amos." It was Femolly, sitting in the front row. "He can't talk. You know that. Please don't hit him no more."

Amos turned me loose and walked over to stand in front of Femolly. I almost fell down.

"Why can't he talk, Femolly?" Amos said. "Tell me. Why can't he talk?"

"He's been hurt. His vocal cords has been ripped up."

"You all know Garvis Lee," he said. "And you all know that Femolly is right. He can't talk. Hasn't been able to talk in two years. The best doctors in America can't make him talk. All of Ma Bell's millions can't make him talk. All the power of modern science and technology can't make him talk.

"But I'm standing here telling you that Garvis Lee can talk. I'm telling you that he can talk as good as you and me. I'm telling you that he can sing! Open your mouth and sing God's praises, Garvis Lee. Sing! Now!"

Everybody stared at me and I tried to sing, but it was just like before. Nothing came out. Amos slapped me again.

"Sing!" he said, but I couldn't.

He grabbed my throat and squeezed. I was almost choking, but Amos didn't let up. I got dizzy and lost track of where I was and felt myself falling down a deep black hole. Spots of light danced in the distance. Then I was on the floor in the vomit and blood with a dying duck lodged in my throat. That's what it sounded like. No human ever made a noise like that. Amos kicked me and told me to stand up and sing, and I tried, but my feet felt like wings and the duck was me. I lay there twitching and flapping with Amos kicking and screaming and the duck squawking like he had a pencil up his ass. Amos jammed a knee in my chest and started using his fists on my face when suddenly fire exploded in

my throat and sizzling pieces of dead duck flew up and burned holes through my brain. At that very instant, I knew I could talk.

I can't say exactly what happened after that because I didn't wake up until two days later, but they say that I jumped up bloody in the glow of the Lord and talked like a typewriter until Amos told me to sing, and I sang in the tongues of angels until the Holy Spirit came riding a powerful swirling wind and swelled the tent with his presence, and all the stakes tore from the ground and beat against the canvas as loud as a thousand drums while Amos moved through the tent laying his hands on the people and spreading the tongue with his touch. And many were saved. Ask anybody who was there.

He left Salvation a few days later. I don't know why he left, or where he went, or when he's coming back, but I know Amos Virgil is a prophet who can heal. I know it every time I talk.

#### GRAVY

There's some that believe strictly on faith and there's some that's seen things. Some say them that believe without seeing will be better off in heaven than them that saw things, but I don't see that as the truth. The Lord sees all and knows what needs showing and who needs to see.



Them that need to see, do. I can't say if I would have believed without seeing, but that's something we'll never know, because I saw some things. Amos showed me. I don't know the reason he picked me to see, only he knows that, but I'll go to my grave loving him for it, for all I've got in this world I owe to him. My wife and kids, my home and friends, my standing in the church, this little place of business. Everything I've got I wouldn't have except for Amos Virgil. Without Amos Virgil I'd be just another dead nigger in hell.

He showed me the first time on the night he got ordained. That's back when I thought guns were the answer, and I had spent most of the night in the "Colored Only" room at the Goldmine Club, drinking beer and trying to educate a group of black boys who were waiting on the draft. I was the first Nam Vet in Salvation and they let me know right off they were ready to join up, draw a check, and kill gooks. They wanted a fight, but I told them their fight wasn't in Vietnam against the oppressed brothers of the Viet Cong, their fight was here in the streets of their own country against their own government, but they were all just simple field niggers who didn't see anything strange about dying for democracy in Vietnam when they couldn't even walk through the front door and order a beer like a

white man, so I got in my car and went home.

That's when I found Granddaddy Ancient. I thought something might be wrong when I drove up, because the front door was wide open and all the lights were off, but I knew for certain when I heard Bodica crying in the front yard. I found her under some bushes and finally got her to come out, but she was too hysterical to do anything but point towards the house.

I pulled my blade and went in. The house was quiet. I turned on the light and called for Femolly, but nobody answered. Somebody had done a number on the house. To this day I can't imagine what they were looking for. Everybody knew Ancient didn't have any money, and certainly not any drugs, but it was sure a mess. I found Ancient lying on the bedroom floor in a pool of blood. He looked dead to me, but when I got closer I could tell he was still alive by the way the blood pumped from the wounds in his chest. He had been stabbed several times.

I couldn't find Femolly and ran outside to look for her, but Bodica said she had stayed at the revival to counsel with the new Christians. I went back inside and wrapped a towel around Ancient as best I could.

He was a big man, but after I slapped Bodica to her senses, she helped me drag him to the car. The streets were empty and I made good time, but it looked we were wasting good gas to me. I didn't see he had any chance at all. He

was losing too much blood. It covered the floorboard by the time we got to Cocoudrie Clinic on Main Street.

I pulled up in the parking lot and ran around to the passenger door. We slid Ancient out to the edge of the seat and tried to get under him, but we lost our balance and fell. Ancient hit the pavement like a sack of concrete. Bodica fell down beside him, cradled his head in her arms, and cried. I've seen more than one man bleed to death, and Ancient was just about there, so I stepped back to let Bodica say her goodbyes alone. That's when Amos got there.

"Can I do anything to help you people?" he said. He was standing on the sidewalk with Beth. They were holding hands. He didn't know who we were.

"You can preach his funeral in about three days," I said. "He'd appreciate that."

Amos' eyes opened up when he heard me, and he ran toward us. Beth started to follow him, but he told her to stay away. He pulled Bodica up by the arm.

"Go get a doctor," he said. "Run! Bang on the door! Get somebody."

"It's too late for a doctor," I said. "He needs an undertaker."

"Amos, what's wrong?" Beth said. She started to come in closer. Amos turned and yelled at her.

"Stay back! How did this happen?" he said.

"That's the way I found him."

Amos bent over and whispered in Ancient's ear.

"Ancient? Can you hear me, Ancient?"

"He don't hear nothing, man. He's dead." But he wasn't dead and his eyes opened then quickly closed.

"You'll be okay, Ancient. You'll be okay."

"Aw shit, man. He ain't gone be okay. Why you telling him that for?" I said. I didn't need to hear anymore and went to the car for a smoke. Amos leaned over real close and rubbed Ancient's head with one hand and his chest with the other. It looked like he was making mudpies in the blood. Beth walked up quietly and stood looking over his shoulder. He didn't know she was there.

Just about that time Bodica came running from the clinic with a doctor, and Amos stood up and backed into Beth.'

"I told you to stay away," he said.

I held Bodica in my arms while the doctor examined Ancient.

"What is this, some kind of a joke?" he said when he stood up.

"We ain't laughing are we?"

"This man's not hurt."

"What do you mean he's not hurt. That's blood ain't it?"

"Yes, it's blood all right. Do you mind telling me where it came from?"

"The tooth fairy," I said. "Hell, man. It came from his veins where do you think?"

The doctor said: "If this is a joke, I fail to find it amusing. I get little enough sleep as it is without getting roused out of bed to be the butt of some poor attempt at humor."

"What's funny about somebody bleeding to death?" I said.

"You better look again," the doctor said.

"You better see about some glasses, doc." I looked over at Amos and dropped down beside Ancient. I took his shirt in my hand and ripped it apart, and when I did, Ancient opened his eyes.

"Gravy," he said. I put my hand on his chest, but felt no wound, plenty of blood, but no wounds. I used the shirt to wipe up the blood and his chest was as smooth as a cue ball.

"Now, do you want to tell me about this?" the doctor said. "I can call the sheriff if you'd rather talk to him."

You could have killed me with a feather. Ancient sat up and waved at Amos who was backing away into the shadows. I went after him and grabbed his shoulder, but he didn't stop.

"Hold it, man," I said and grabbed him again.

"What the hell is going on here?"

Amos gave Beth a little push and said: "Wait for me

at the corner."

"Tell me," I said. "What's going on?"

"You saw it," Amos said. "You tell me."

"Damn right I'll tell you! I'm telling now that I've done some cutting and I've been cut and that man there was cut bad. He bled all over my car and now he ain't cut at all. You tell me how that is."

"Maybe you were mistaken."

"Mistaken, hell! He was bleeding to death and you healed him. . ."

"I didn't heal him," he said.

"The hell you didn't. You see him sitting over there smiling don't you. I saw you heal him."

"Ancient is an important man," Amos said. "God healed him."

"Man you can't tell me. . ."

"You saw it," Amos said. "You believe what you want to."

Amos took Beth's hand and starting walking away. I watched him, then I looked at Ancient. He was smiling at me. I turned back and hollered at Amos.

"Are you God? Tell me! Are you God?" He never looked back and neither did I. I followed him to Beth's house and waited for him there. Almost two hours later he came out the back door.

"What are you doing?" he asked when he saw me.

"Waiting," I said.

"For what?" he said.

"For you," I said.

He just shrugged his shoulders and started walking down the driveway.

"Where are you going?" I said.

"Home," he said. "Where are you going?"

"Wherever you do," I said. "I've seen lots of things, but I never seen nothing like that. I'm going with you."

From that moment until the day Amos left Salvation I was never once more than a hundred feet from his side. Now there's some in Salvation that say he isn't coming back because he's dead. Some say he never planned to come back. But when he left he said he would be back and I know what he said because I was there. He said he was coming back, and I'm waiting for him, and if I live to be a thousand I'll still be waiting because I know he saved me for a reason and I've got to know why.

E N D O F T H E C A L L